



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

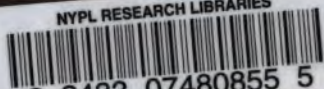
We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07480855 5

A WOMAN
OF FEELING

LOUISE MAUNSELL
FIELD

1. Fiction American



Ken.

18

7

A WOMAN OF FEELING

A WOMAN OF FEELING

*Not used
10/10/32
W.W.*

BY
LOUISE MAUNSELL FIELD
Author of "Katharine Trevalyan"

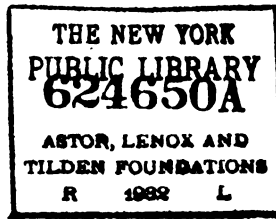
+



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

1916

NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY



COPYRIGHT, 1916, BY
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY

JOHN W. WILSON
CLERK
MAR 11 1911

32X595

**TO
L. S. F.**



A WOMAN OF FEELING



CHAPTER FIRST

SYLVIA FARNHAM paused in the doorway, regarding the scene before her with some timidity and a good deal of curiosity. To her unaccustomed eyes the room looked full of people, though there was in fact but one rather large group gathered about the easel which stood near the bay-window, and some half-dozen couples scattered around. The man at the door's sudden proclamation of "Miss Farnham!" disconcerted her, so loud did the name seem to ring above the babel of talk and laughter; an instant later she was wondering whether he were "a real butler" or only one provided by a caterer for the occasion.

Her hostess and very distant relative, Mrs. Dareth, left the two women with whom she had been talking and advanced to greet her.

"Sylvia dear, how sweet of you to come!" She had taken the young girl's hand in both her own and was pressing it affectionately. "I feel as if it were rather mean of me to ask you to give up a whole afternoon just to look at my

portrait; but now that you are here I intend to keep you. You'll stay late, won't you? I want you to wait until most of this crowd has gone and meet Mr. Maurice comfortably. He's surrounded just at present."


Mrs. Dareth's assurance that there was a crowd somehow enforced conviction that the empty spaces must exist only in one's own imagination. Her tone, like the touch of her slim, cool fingers, was a caress. And Sylvia's sensations resembled those of a kitten when gently stroked the right way. She smiled, shyly returning the other's light pressure.

"Of course I'll stay if you'd like me to," she said. "And—and I want awfully to see the portrait."

"You darling child! I believe you really do care about it." There was a scarcely perceptible tremor in Mrs. Dareth's languid voice. "First I'm going to introduce you to some dear friends of mine and then I must go and attend to my duties. I'd far rather stay and have a chat with you, but——" A shrug of her shapely shoulders finished the sentence, and still holding Sylvia's willing hand she drew her across the room to where a man and a woman stood talking together.

Had Sylvia been twenty-five instead of barely nineteen she might have wondered why Vida Dareth chose to present her to these two instead of to any of her younger guests, especially when they were so obviously contented with each other's society; but she admired her elegant cousin far too much to question any of her doings. With regard to Miss Lane and Dr. Macneven, however, no such feeling restrained her; she looked them over with the unconsciously cruel appraisement of youth and mentally pronounced them a pair of middle-aged frumps.

Margaret Lane readily divined this judgment, and her dark eyes smiled as she exchanged an understanding glance with the doctor. Yet behind the amused tolerance was the smart of an unhealed wound. She knew her own plainness—none better; it was a fact she had schooled herself to recognise and to accept calmly, aware though she was that it barred her from what she most desired. But to see it affirmed by the clear blue eyes of this rosy-lipped, pink-cheeked young girl hurt her; and hurt her all the more because she despised herself for her own susceptibility to this particular pain.



"I've heard a good deal about you from Mrs. Dareth, Miss Farnham," she began in the quiet, pleasant tone to which she had learned to control her voice, whatever her feelings might be. "You're a cousin of her's, aren't you?"

"Yes, a sort of cousin. I never saw much of her until this Fall," explained Sylvia with a shy honesty which quickly softened Dr. Macneven's keen glance; "but she's been just lovely to me lately."

"She is lovely," Miss Lane assented, smiling a little, "and in every way."

"Doesn't she look too perfectly beautiful this afternoon?" For a moment the warmth of Sylvia's admiration dispelled her timidity.

The corners of Dr. Macneven's eyes crinkled before the smile touched his straight, strong mouth. "And yet men are always being blamed for rating women according to their looks! As if the women didn't set that standard themselves! You invariably talk about beauty as though it were some sort of meritorious achievement."

Inwardly the plain woman winced; outwardly she laughed.

"Sometimes it is," she answered lightly. "An achievement wrought by hard work and

much artistic endeavour; but only men admire that kind. Here's a paradox for you! The more of an effort good looks have cost their owner the less we women think of them. Miss Farnham and I acclaim Vida's because they came to her naturally—without her having to struggle for them; it's a sort of Pagan worship."

"Then according to your theory men are better Christians than women!" he challenged gaily.

"Not a bit of it; only less quick to see the difference between art and nature."

"Or more tolerant."

"They ought to be! After all, it's they who choose the model women try to copy."

"Try . . . or tried?" His eyes twinkled.

"Both," she asserted quickly.

"The modern woman? And you a feminist!"

"Certainly!" She tossed the ball back to him, quite undismayed. "Man wails about his loneliness, his desire for comradeship, and . . . *nous voilà!*"

The physician chuckled; and he who knew humanity so well and sympathised with it so keenly did not even suspect that Margaret Lane was doing her best to give him what he wanted

—meeting his mood, though to reach it she must tread upon thorns.

Sylvia meanwhile had found the interchange of banter too swift for her not very nimble wits to follow. She saved herself from boredom by watching Mrs. Dareth glide about the room, admiring and envying her lissome figure, the softly flowing lines of her amber-hued and evidently very expensive gown, the grace of her manner and frequent gesture. Sylvia had been brought up in very moderate circumstances. Vida Dareth was the richest woman, this house the most luxurious that she had ever known. And though to many Mrs. Dareth's income would have seemed a mere bagatelle and her house just tolerable, both were rather awe-inspiring to the young girl.

The guests began to leave; Sylvia, watching still, wished she could imitate her cousin's way of saying good-bye. It was so evident—to her, at least—that Mrs. Dareth had exactly the appropriate phrase and look and tone for each person. The doctor and Miss Lane, pausing in their talk, noticed her absorption and glanced smilingly and with complete understanding at each other.

“Now come and see my portrait.” Mrs.

Dareth, her arm slipped affectionately through Sylvia's, led the way to the easel. "What do you think of it?"

Sylvia did not know how to answer. She disliked—or as she herself would have worded it, hated,—the portrait instantly; but had she tried for a week she could not have explained the antagonism, the actual repulsion it aroused within her. Yet every feature was admirably reproduced: there was the pointed chin, the big brown eyes so curiously flecked with yellow, the small crimson mouth; the dead-leaf coloured hair waved softly back from the low white forehead where it formed a "widow's peak," the svelt figure had all the carefully cultivated grace which characterised the original. It was Vida Dareth who leaning back in a huge carved chair smiled at her out of the gilt frame—Vida Dareth, sweet and languid and self-confident as in life. She was too ignorant to judge the portrait as a work of art, to recognise its crudities and its great promise. She only knew that it was an excellent likeness; and that she did not want to look at it.

"Well?" said Mrs. Dareth. "Don't be afraid of Mr. Maurice—oh, I forgot! Mr. Maurice, Miss Farnham—criticism's good for him."

Sylvia made an effort; but she was too inexperienced a performer upon the social stage to be able as yet to hide her antipathies.

"It's tremendously like you," she stammered. "And—and what a lovely gown!"


They all laughed, much to Sylvia's embarrassment. Then Noel Maurice—his name had been Morris until a few months past, when he had taken Mrs. Dareth's advice and altered it—said lightly:

"Thanks for the compliment, Miss Farnham. *I* designed Mrs. Dareth's gown, and I'm enormously proud of it."

Sylvia's smile was uncertain. And perhaps it was then that a plan whose effects were destined to be far-reaching first entered, nebulous, indistinct as vapour, into Mrs. Dareth's mind.

"I know more about clothes than I do about pictures," Sylvia replied, hesitating but grateful, "though I don't know very much about clothes."

"You're on the side of the great majority, then." Maurice did not trouble to veil the indifference in his voice. Miss Farnham's opinions did not interest him in the least; only her unqualified admiration could have done that.



Dr. Macneven, who had been carefully examining the portrait, now spoke. "You've made a great success of the flesh tones of this arm, here where the light falls across it."

Maurice's glance swept the older man with a half-insolent egotism he made no faintest effort to conceal.

"I'm glad you like it." His words were civil enough; his tone matched his glance.

The doctor drew himself sharply erect; an instant the two men measured each other. And it may be that in that instant the shadow of the future fell upon them both.

Then Dr. Macneven's sense of humour sprang to the rescue; he had spoken out of an abundant knowledge, and so could afford to ignore the rebuff.

"What a handsome, talented, absurdly conceited youngster it is!" he thought.

Mrs. Dareth caught his smile and swiftly interposed. "The portrait's to be exhibited next month, and I want you all to go and listen to people's praise of it and then come back and tell me. I feel as if Mr. Maurice had turned me from a woman of no importance into a personage."

It seemed to two of the little group that Mau-

rice agreed with her—partly, at any rate. Yet through the opaque wall of his conceit they could discern something—a certain wistfulness. . . .

“I suppose Julius is delighted with the picture,” remarked the doctor good-naturedly. “Where is he, by the way?”

“At the office, probably. I do wish you’d talk to him, doctor. He’s working himself to death, and he won’t listen to me. No matter how hard I try I can’t seem to make him understand that we really don’t need such an immense amount of money . . . just for the two of us. It really worries me terribly.” Vida Dareth’s yellow-flecked brown eyes sought the doctor’s grey ones in a distressful glance.

He shrugged his broad, slightly bowed shoulders. “He won’t listen to me, either. I tell him that’s the worst of having an old friend for a patient. Still, I don’t think there is anything for you to worry over.”

But he liked her all the better for her solicitude, unnecessary though he thought it.

“Still, I do wish you’d wait and see him,” she answered appealingly. “Can you spare the time? You’ve always got somebody clamouring

for you!" The reproach in her tone subtilised her flattery.

"I've nothing special on until to-night. I told them to 'phone me here if anything turned up."

An instant Mrs. Dareth rested her white, gem-laden fingers on the doctor's rather shabby coat-sleeve. Alan Macneven was justifiably regarded as a very successful man, yet somehow or other, he never had much money to spare—that is, for his personal needs.

"It's such a comfort to feel that you really care about dear Julius," she said softly.

Maurice meanwhile had been discoursing to Sylvia and Margaret Lane upon the subject of portrait-painters in general and himself in particular, thereby greatly impressing one of his hearers and amusing the other. Each, however, now said that she must go.

"When am I to see you again, Margaret? If I call you up some afternoon will that be all right?" asked Mrs. Dareth, graciously urgent. "I know you work in the mornings."

"Yes, mornings are my busy time."

"And when is the new book coming out? I hope it's as exciting as the last! Aren't you crazy about Miss Lane's stories, Sylvia?"

Into Margaret's plain face a change had come; a mere slight stiffening of the irregular features, no more. And though she replied quietly it was with an effort revealed to Dr. Macneven's sympathetic ears by the touch of constraint in her tone. "Before Christmas, I think. Now I must run. Telephone any afternoon you can, and come and have tea with me. Good-bye."

She vanished between the heavy velour portières. Sylvia would have thought it great fun to go with her, but lacked the courage.

"I'm coming for you Friday morning about eleven with a taxi," said Mrs. Dareth, her hands on the young girl's shoulders; she was a little the taller of the two. "We'll do some shopping and then lunch at the Plaza. How will that suit you?"

"I'd just love it! How awfully good you are to me!" Sylvia's eyes shone with pleasure.

Dr. Macneven reflected that there was something very charming in this pretty little girl's adoration of her exquisite cousin.

"Nonsense! I like to have you with me; and I'm often a bit lonely, dear. We'll run around a good deal this Winter, you and I." Vida Dareth smiled as she spoke, glad to have se-

cured at least one morning's awakening unspoilt by the question of how she was to fill up the long hours confronting her. "You're not a working-woman, thank heaven!" she added.

"You evidently don't approve of working-women," said Dr. Macneven rather drily.

"Oh no! I wouldn't put it that way." Mrs. Dareth's slender hands endorsed her protest. She had given much time and attention to the cultivation of her natural grace, and with it that trick of frequent gesture which in her opinion emphasised her individuality. "I feel dreadfully sorry for them, of course—every woman ought to have a man to take care of her. But there is no doubt about it, when a woman goes out into the world and takes a man's place she does lose her charm and her—well, her feminine delicacy; and then she's so likely to take up all sorts of queer notions. Even poor dear Margaret's become terribly radical."

"Margaret Lane's a mighty intelligent woman," responded the doctor promptly, and with more vigour, perhaps, than politeness quite warranted. He did not like that "poor dear Margaret."

"Which of itself," put in Maurice, "is enough to prove Mrs. Dareth's case. A clever

14 A WOMAN OF FEELING

woman may be charming, but an intelligent one——!" His shrug was eloquent; he was young enough to feel quite cynical and worldly-wise.

The doctor's retort was checked by the entrance of Julius Dareth, a tall, thin man, with strongly marked features and iron-grey hair, obviously some years older than his wife.

"Hullo, Alan!" he said. "They told me you were here."

His tone implied that this was the sufficient explanation of his own presence.

"Julius dear," Vida interposed, "you remember my little cousin, Sylvia Farnham, don't you?"

Mr. Dareth shook hands with Sylvia, nodded to Maurice, and accepted his wife's kiss, all without a word. His silence seemed to infect the others, but at last the doctor spoke.

"Take me up to your den," he said. "I'm going to give you a piece of my mind. You'll excuse us, Mrs. Dareth?"

The two men left the room together, and when they returned to it half an hour later it was empty. Even the temporary butler had departed, and the doctor found his hat and coat

for himself. As he started to open the door Dareth caught him by the shoulder.

"Alan, I said things to you just now I didn't mean—things I'd no business to say. But you've no idea how you—how you riled me!" He gave a mirthless little laugh. "When you tell me to go slow and let up a bit and all the rest of it, old man, you're quite right, of course, only you—well, you don't know what you're asking. I'm not . . . There are certain matters, conditions which can't be explained, that . . ." He stopped short, pressing his lips together.

"My fault entirely." The doctor was perplexed, troubled, and consequently brusque.

"It's all right?"

"Of course. Don't be an ass."

The two old friends shook hands warmly. Then one passed out into the night and the other ascended his brilliantly lighted stairway.

CHAPTER SECOND

MARGARET LANE lived alone on the top floor of an old-fashioned red-brick house, once a handsome private residence, now with a florist's shop on the ground floor and "two rooms, bath, and kitchenette" apartments above. She was a woman whom people always spoke of as "so successful" and who looked upon herself as an utter failure.

For the novels about which Mrs. Dareth had spoken with such enthusiasm were not admired by their producer. So far back as she could remember Margaret had wanted and tried to write; but the stories she worked over with loving care went from publisher to publisher, returning at last to rest in an especial drawer of her desk. And she was herself a sufficiently good critic to realise after a time that their doom was deserved. One day, however, goaded by want of money, she concocted a murder mystery which was promptly accepted, and reprinted many times. Greatly to her own astonishment she found herself able to turn out "thrillers" with considerable rapidity—tales

she knew to be devoid of any literary merit but which, gaily bound and lavishly illustrated, sold very well and brought her the cheques she sorely needed.

Margaret's had been the misfortune of having for her mother an excellent example of a type of good woman once generally applauded. She was a submissive, self-satisfied person who had married Herbert Lane, knowing him to be what was euphuistically termed "fast," and with the avowed intention of reforming him. She did not succeed: but she would have been horrified had anyone suggested such a thing as divorce, and considered herself a model of virtuous endurance, quite sure, as she often said, to find her reward hereafter. Among her husband's failings was habitual intemperance; but he had a strong constitution and it was fifteen years before he died in a fit of delirium tremens. During those fifteen years, his wife bore him six children. The eldest, a boy, was feeble-minded, and presently developed a fondness for using matches in a way which necessitated his being confined in a private institution. Margaret was the third, and the other four were lucky enough to die in childhood of the various diseases to which their sickly bodies were an

easy prey. She was mentally and physically the one strong member of the family, and consequently the one who bore its burdens, her mother having declined into a comfortable semi-invalidism some years before she—Margaret—grew up. Mrs. Lane, who had a perfectly ladylike ignorance of business, left all financial affairs in her husband's hands—"For how," as she frequently remarked, "could she bear to let people say that she did not trust the father of her dear children?"—and the natural result was that Margaret eventually found herself left with a very diminutive income and a feeble-minded brother dependent on her for support. That her struggle had been a hard one goes without saying.

One evening, later in that same week during which Mrs. Dareth's private and informal view of her portrait had taken place, Margaret sat waiting in her little parlour. She held an open book in her hand, but with every nerve tense in anticipation of a familiar footfall on the stairs outside her door, she could not read. Presently, abandoning the attempt, she took up a bit of sewing; it lay idle upon her lap. She could only listen. . . .

The room, in flat contradiction of Mrs. Dar-

eth's hints, revealed a personality essentially feminine. There are women who can make a boarding-house hall bedroom look homelike, and Margaret Lane was of their number. It is more than probable that no interior decorator would have tolerated some of her combinations—that piece of old Chinese embroidery, for instance, near the small plaster cast of the Winged Victory—yet everything seemed to be in its rightful place and the general effect was restful and harmonious. Even such relics of wealthier days as the polished mahogany centre table and the painting of a handsome old gentleman in an appallingly stiff stock were without either the plaintive or the supercilious air their kind usually possess. The table shone, the portrait smiled, benignly.

Suddenly Margaret sat erect; her work was thrown aside and the door opened before the expected ring had ceased to vibrate.

“Well, Alan!”

“Well, Margaret!”

It was significant that no one had ever called Margaret Lane Daisy or Madge or Peggy, or anything in fact except plain Margaret.

There was a cordial handclasp before the two turned into the room with which they were

almost equally familiar. The doctor hung his hat and coat on the accustomed hook and settled himself amid the comfortable hollows of the big, thickly cushioned chair they called his; its high back made a welcome resting place for his weary head, whose thick, stubby brown hair showed grey at the temples, though he was still under forty. Miss Lane resumed her place on the other side of the centre table with its pleasant litter of books and magazines, and again took up her sewing. Followed a peaceful, unconstrained silence which neither felt obliged to break.

Several minutes passed before Margaret said quietly: "You're tired out, Alan. Something's been troubling you."

It was a statement of fact, not a question.

He nodded an assent. "No use trying to hide that from you, friend Margaret."

"What was it?" Knowing him as she did, she felt sure he wanted to tell, though he would not force the probably disagreeable story upon her.

"A girl, seventeen years old—a hand in a box-factory at five dollars a week. She got into trouble and—tried to escape the consequences. The man was a 'cadet' she'd met at a dance-

hall. He deserted her when he found he couldn't make her go on the street for him and she was desperate. Some people in the tenement where she lived came for me—too late, of course. The child was literally frightened out of her wits. Thought she'd made God hate her and was going straight to hell—that was her idea of religion. I did what I could for her—it wasn't much. But I managed to comfort her a bit, and she was so afraid, so pitifully afraid that I couldn't——”

He stopped abruptly, looking half embarrassed, half guilty; and Margaret finished the sentence.

“That you couldn't bear to let her face it alone, and stayed with her and helped her until the end. I thought so.”

The doctor's strong fingers drummed impatiently on the arms of his chair. With his broad forehead deeply furrowed, his shaggy eyebrows drawn together, his thin, clean-shaven lips tightly compressed, he looked a very different man from the tolerant, amused spectator whom Sylvia Farnham had met in Mrs. Dar-eth's drawing-room. And the woman he called “friend” responded to the one mood as she had to the other.

"She kept begging me not to let her die," he said.

A lump rose in Margaret's throat. For to her the brusque words, the harsh tone conveyed much that he had left unspoken; and she had a rare power of visualisation.

"Oh, the poor little thing!" she murmured half under her breath. "To die—like that—at seventeen!" Then striving instinctively to fulfil his unuttered need she added aloud: "But you have saved so many."

He drew his brows yet closer together in a look of pain. "I've lost three patients during the last few days. That poor girl: a man—an ironworker, crushed by a falling beam; he told me if I couldn't 'patch him up all right, I'd better let him croak. You see, doc,' he said, 'it'll be a darn sight easier for my old woman and the kids to get along if they don't have me hangin' round for them to take care of'—and a boy a bit over twenty. He'd never had the ghost of a chance—sold papers on the streets when he wasn't much more than a baby, got sent to a reformatory, learned pocket-picking there and presently went to jail. Came out with tuberculosis and it didn't take long——"

Again the doctor broke his sentence off short,

but this time Margaret did not try to finish it. Suddenly he got up and began to prowls about the room, stopping now and then in front of one of the low bookcases to stare at the rows of more or less shabby volumes with unseeing eyes. Then terse, disjointed phrases seemed literally to force themselves through the gateway of his compressed lips:

“The pain all around—everywhere—the ceaseless, grinding pain! And we can do so little—so miserably, ridiculously little! I’ve worked—I do work—hard; I needn’t tell you that! But what have I done? Helped a few individuals here and there! It goes on and on and on, day after day, year after year. . . . Is there any real use in trying? It seems so hopeless, so utterly futile—like fighting some horrible machine with your bare hands.” He clenched his own until the knuckles showed white. “I feel about ready to chuck it all—just give up and lie back and keep quiet.”

“But you never will give up.” Margaret’s clear, steady voice was as decided as her words. “Never, while you’re needed. And you *are* needed: there’s no doubt of that.”

With a skill which had become more than half intuitive she was giving him the assurance

he unconsciously craved. For this was not the first time she had seen him in one of those fits of despondency, so strongly at variance with his usual optimism, when he felt that he was trying to empty the ocean with a teacup.

He paused by her chair and stood looking down at her with frankly affectionate eyes.

"You're a mighty good pal, friend Margaret! I don't know how I'd ever get along without you. Forgive me; I didn't mean to go on the rampage this way, but when I'm with you I don't talk of one thing and think about another." He paused; then he flung out his hands—the typical physician's hands, white, well-shapen, and strong—in an abrupt, half-despairing gesture. "I see so much that ought to be done, and I can do so little I get wild with impatience sometimes."

"Because you keep trying to do your own share and those of at least a dozen other men at the same time. How about the people who don't even want to help?"

She had purposely challenged one of his fundamental beliefs and the reaction upon which she had counted came swift and sure.

"They're blind, that's all. They don't see—they *can't* see. If they did they couldn't bear

it. The change would come here and now—in our own time. Think of the preventable diseases and occupational diseases—it's the unnecessary pain that's wicked, intolerable! When we know how it could be stopped and let it go on killing, maiming, torturing—Nature's cruel enough, God knows, but we can fight her more easily than we can the——”

“The social order,” Margaret suggested as he paused in his stumbling, headlong speech.

“We'll change even the social order some day—we must. If I didn't believe that, if I had no faith in the Great Vision, I'd despair through and through.” He paused once more and his grim, determined look gave way to a kindlier expression: “Beyond even your power of cheering up, friend Margaret,” he added gratefully.

She raised her hand as though searching for a stray hairpin: and thus effectually concealed the momentary quiver of her lips.

For a while neither spoke; at last the doctor said contritely:

“Now that I've finished railing at the universe, suppose you tell me how it's been treating you these days?”

“Oh, very much as usual. I've completed

those schedules you wanted for the wage bill—here they are.” She indicated a neat bundle of typewritten manuscript and hurried on before he had chance to voice his thanks: “And I sent off the last of my proof sheets yesterday. Now I mean to take a good long vacation before I even try to think about a plot.”

Her tone dismissed the subject.

But he persevered. “For another . . . ?”

“For another ‘penny dreadful.’ That’s what they really are, you know.”

“See here, Margaret”—both arms on the table between them, he turned and bent a little towards her—“why don’t you drop this stuff you hate so, and try again? Now that you’ve no one except yourself to look after——” He hesitated; her brother had died during the preceding year. “You’re too big, too fine a woman,” he continued presently, “to be wasted on—on ‘penny dreadfuls.’ ”

Slowly she shook her head.

“I’ve no illusions left,” she answered quietly. “Oh, it isn’t false modesty! I know I’m a hundred per cent better than the trash I turn out. But there’s something lacking. I—I can’t make characters live. I’ve tried. Over and over again—oftener even than you know.

I always fail. And the 'penny dreadfuls' mean money, and money means power, the ability to—to help a little. So there you are. It's no use shutting your eyes to facts; that doesn't alter them the least tiny bit."

While speaking she had laid her sewing on the table, her two hands resting upon it. The doctor leaning forward covered them both with one of his own.

"How strong you are!" he exclaimed almost under his breath. And his tone was that of a man who knew through bitter experience what it means to look disappointment in the face.

An instant she hesitated; then she gave the subject a violent twist.

"Tell me," she said, "what did you really think of Vida Dareth's portrait?"

"It's clever," he replied slowly. "It's diabolically clever. Yes, that's the word—diabolic. It's Mrs. Dareth to the life, and yet it looks——"

He stopped, puzzled to express the curious effect the picture had had upon him.

"To me it looks almost—cruel. Unfeeling, at least. And Vida isn't that, though she may be what you call blind."

"Oh, she's a social parasite, I admit. But

then she's such an exquisite one! You're tempted to believe that women as lovely as Mrs. Dareth and Miss—what's the name of that pretty cousin of hers? Farnham, isn't it?—ought to be taken care of just so that the rest of us may have the pleasure of looking at them occasionally." He smiled with reminiscent yet quite impersonal enjoyment.

Margaret Lane had long ago learned how to wince inwardly and make no outward sign.

"Vida would agree with you, I fancy, about the divine right of beauty. She's a dear, just the same." Margaret was nothing if not generous. "Miss Farnham I don't know."

"Well, I think she's more agreeable to look at than Mrs. Dareth. She's so sweet and fresh and young . . . like a daisy or a wild rose. Mrs. Dareth's rather too much of a hothouse plant."

"I wonder if Mr. Maurice wouldn't be inclined to argue that point with you?"

Margaret had scarcely spoken before she regretted words in whose utterance her volition seemed to have played no part.

"Not much!" Dr. Macneven's eyes twinkled. "He'd state his opinion and expect me to be crushed."

"He's certainly conceited enough! But he's clever—yes, and attractive too."

"I grant you the cleverness."

"But you'd rather not!" She laughed at him with a gay mockery which would have been fascinating had she been a pretty woman. She had an odd, unreasoning sense of relief that was tinged with apprehension. "You've taken a dislike to him and so . . . Alan, no one could possibly call you a judicial-minded person!"

He accepted her ridicule good-naturedly, laughing with her.

"Anyhow, I'd like to have another chance to inspect that portrait. You know," he added irrelevantly, "you know Julius is an old friend of mine, though we don't see much of each other nowadays."

"And he—cares for Vida?" As so often happened, she was answering his thought rather than his words. And the apprehension lying in the back of her mind was feeling its way forward as though through a fog.

"Used to be crazy about her. I imagine he gives her all the time he can spare from Wall Street—if he doesn't play the game there mainly on her account. She's the sort of

30 A WOMAN OF FEELING

woman who needs an expensive setting, and he'd naturally want to provide it for her."

A certain diffidence had crept into the doctor's tone. This big-hearted, brusque, somewhat dictatorial man had an instinctive shyness about dealing with the more intimate kinds of human relationships: and he remembered how Dareth had looked and spoken at the moment of their last parting.

Now he in his turn changed the subject abruptly. "Have you seen that new play at the Macready yet—'The Needle's Eye'?"

"No, not yet." She had expected, and hoped, he would ask that question.

"Suppose we go then, next Thursday night? Will you—if nothing turns up?"

It was a familiar phrase; Dr. Macneven's plans were so often upset at the last moment that their frequent theatre-going was always conditional.

"Of course I will; and we'll hope for good luck."

After the doctor had gone Margaret stood awhile beside his chair, touching the place where his head had rested with lingering fin-

gers. Suddenly she bent down and laid her cheek against it. . . .

Returning to her own chair she sat motionless for a long time, bending forward with her elbows on her knees and her too-square chin in the palms of her big-boned, capable hands. For every happy hour she had to pay in pain; and she never grudged the price. It was when she best realised how much she was to Alan Macneven that she felt most keenly how very much more she wanted to be to him. Neither her love for him nor her knowledge of it was a thing of yesterday. They had been close friends for many years, and their friendship was still young when she forced herself to face the fact that while his feeling for her might strengthen and develop it would change only in degree, and not in kind.

Then since she could not have what she wanted she strove to be satisfied with what she had. Her philosophy of life was gratitude for the half-loaf; not always an easy one to put into practice. No human being, she knew, stood so near to the doctor as she did; to no one else in all the world would he have talked as he had talked to her that evening. She was, as he had said, his "pal"—the "friend Margaret" he so

often called her. And she believed—nay, she knew—that had she been dowered with even the average share of good looks she could have turned his affection into flame. But if during her youth that had been impossible, what chance was there now, when she was rapidly approaching the late thirties? One side of his man's nature she could never hope to touch.

And since this was, and would always be, since any change must necessarily be a change for the worse, she prayed only that she might keep the place now hers. The darkest shadow in her life was her dread of an unknown, ever possible woman.

CHAPTER THIRD

TIME as recorded on a taximeter was something for which Sylvia Farnham had a deep respect. Consequently she was dressed and standing at her window by eleven o'clock on Friday morning, there to wait and wonder for nearly an hour before Mrs. Dareth appeared, full of affectionate apologies.

"I'm so sorry, dear! I had such a quantity of things to attend to it seemed as though I'd never get off. I wouldn't dream of complaining or even talking about it to anyone, but the truth is that Julius is often very exacting. Ah, well!" —Mrs. Dareth smiled and sighed—"I don't mean to bother you with my troubles, Sylvia dear. By the way, I never asked if I might call you 'Sylvia'? I adore the name! It's so sweet and musical and poetic—it just suits you. You don't mind my using it, do you? We really are a little bit related, you know."

"I love to have you call me 'Sylvia'! And—and I'm so glad you like the name." Not being used to compliments, Sylvia felt slightly embarrassed.

Vida Dareth slipped the broad stole of pointed fox further off her shoulders. New York's cold weather rarely begins until after Christmas and on this November day furs were a burden. But Mrs. Dareth was too pretty a woman not to regard becomingness as infinitely more important than comfort.

"Then you must call me 'Vida,' " she said. "If you don't I shall feel sure you think me an old woman who must be treated with respect."

This remark was not especially humorous, but Sylvia laughed. Her laughter was easily evoked just then.

"You—old!" She looked with open admiration at her companion's clear, rather colourless but quite unlined skin, at the full crimson lips, the soft, abundant hair arranged in the complex waves and puffs of the prevailing mode, the slender, graceful figure: it was only when she was with Mrs. Dareth that she became dissatisfied with her own pink-and-white complexion, or the dimpled roundness of her young body, and felt crude and gauche.

Vida Dareth laid one perfectly gloved hand whose slim fingers made Sylvia regard her own as too large for true elegance, upon the young

girl's knee. "Not in years, perhaps; but, dear, there are many days when I feel—oh, so old and tired! It's not time that ages one, it's suffering. And I have suffered, I do suffer terribly; though, of course, I never talk about what I have to endure. I wish I could become hardened, indifferent! It's a great misfortune to be born with such an acutely sensitive nature as mine! I think that's one reason why I've grown fond of you so quickly—because I can see what a delicate, highly strung temperament you have."

Sylvia had never thought about them before, but she was immediately convinced that her sensibilities were indeed intense.

"How wonderfully well you understand people!" Her little sigh was a tribute to Mrs. Dareth's penetration.

The sigh was echoed. "Ah, Sylvia"—and Vida Dareth's voice was more than ever a caress—"I wish for your sake that I did! I do so long to save you from the mistakes I've made—from all the bitterness of wasted friendship and wasted . . ." She broke off there, but her meaning was of course obvious, even to unsophisticated Sylvia. She went on in her most earnest manner: "When I care for any-

one, I care with my whole heart and soul. I'd slave for them, starve for them, die for them! I can't help it—it's my nature."

"Oh, I know, I know!" breathed Sylvia, much affected. It would be difficult to say which of the two was enjoying herself the more, for the younger was still content to play second fiddle.

"And in this world," Mrs. Dareth continued sadly, "such love rarely meets with any adequate return. We few who feel keenly and are quick to suffer—we're always lonely. Dear little Sylvia, you won't fail me as others have, will you?"

Glance, gesture, emphasised the appeal. And Vida Dareth meant every word of it—or thought she did.

Sylvia was ready to swear eternal fidelity on the spot, but at that moment the cab stopped before the side entrance of a Fifth Avenue department store often patronised by Mrs. Dareth, and their conversation ceased to be emotional while the young girl followed her companion from counter to counter, watching her "buy things" in a way which seemed to one accustomed as she was to consider seriously whether veiling at twenty-five cents a yard would not "do" in place of the desired kind,

costing thirty-five, lavish in the extreme. It was the first time she had ever shopped with anyone who treated a few dollars one way or the other as a matter of no importance: her first lesson in extravagance. For though the sum total of Mrs. Dareth's purchases was not really so very large, they were nearly all articles bought for the mere pleasure of acquisition, or to gratify some whim; in either case they would be discarded on the morrow. Sylvia felt that there was something audacious, splendidly adventurous even, in such shopping.

Back in the taxi once more, Mrs. Dareth said: "Now I want to go to Mme. Blanche's and see if she has a hat I can wear. Then we'll have our lunch, and afterwards I'd like to take a look at the gallery where my portrait's to be exhibited next week. You don't mind, do you?"

"Why, of course not." At that moment opposition would have seemed to Sylvia a sort of *lèse majesté*.

Vida Dareth spoke with just a shade of deliberation. "The fact is, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we met Noel Maurice there. I told him you were to be with me." Her pause was nicely timed to let Sylvia take in the signifi-

cance of that last sentence: she added, smiling: "Don't you think he's clever?"

"Oh yes, awfully clever. And so good-looking! I think he's quite——" She broke off, flushing. Noel Maurice's claim to her approbation was established, but she hadn't meant to avow it so openly.

A change swept over Mrs. Dareth's face, a change swift and sinister as lightning. But Sylvia's perceptions were not quick enough to catch it, nor keen enough, had they caught it, to divine its meaning. She was aware only of a vague uneasiness, instantly banished by her cousin's affectionate smile.

"I'm glad of that, because he likes you so much. He told me he thought you were one of the most attractive girls he'd met this Winter." The soft voice fairly purred.

Again Sylvia blushed. And Mrs. Dareth held the affectionate smile on her lips: but into her yellow-flecked eyes there had come a look which might have reminded Margaret Lane of the much-discussed portrait.

"I have an idea he's trying to get up the courage to ask you to pose for him," Vida Dareth went on. Velvet-smooth her tone; and yet—was that the glint of steel beneath?

If there was indeed something hard under the velvet, Sylvia did not feel it. To seek below the surface was never her way. Besides, Mrs. Dareth's suggestion dismayed even while it flattered her.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly afford that!" she exclaimed.

"My dear child, you don't suppose he's reached the five-thousand-dollars-a-portrait stage already, do you? He will some day, perhaps, but now he's glad of any chance to pot-boil—illustrations, advertisements, anything he can get. You ought to see his studio, poor boy! Here we are."

Mrs. Dareth was quick to renounce a scheme when it ceased to appeal to her.

Sylvia, who had breakfasted at eight, some two hours or more before her cousin had thought of such a thing, and was possessed of a healthy young appetite, fervently hoped that as it was already after one o'clock the desirable hat might be found without delay. She was obliged to wait, however, as patiently as her hunger and resultant headache would permit, while Vida Dareth—turning to her occasionally with an "I'm afraid this is dreadfully dull for you! I hope you don't mind?"—tried on and

discussed every hat in Mme. Blanche's establishment; or rather, every one that the astute Frenchwoman would show her. She had many customers more profitable and more useful than Mrs. Dareth, and she reserved her masterpieces for them.

At last the hat first considered was bought, the restaurant reached, and the taxi-cab dismissed. Sylvia, now faint for want of food, paid scant attention to her surroundings until luncheon was half over; then she began to be interested in Mrs. Dareth's identification of this, that, and the other individual—identifications frequently incorrect but perfectly satisfactory to the girl, who found it very exciting to be in the same room with people whose names she had seen in the social columns of the newspapers. They lingered over their lunch until every table but theirs was empty, and then spent some time in the dressing-room, where Mrs. Dareth, producing fresh gloves, a veil, and powder from her small, silver-fitted bag, carefully repaired the damage done by the morning's labour. So it was after four o'clock when they started to walk down Fifth Avenue towards the art gallery.

They said little as they strolled along in a

way active Sylvia found somewhat trying. Mrs. Dareth was busy with certain problems which seemed more difficult now than when she had first set out to solve them—doubly difficult because she would let herself be conscious of them in only one aspect—while Sylvia's attention was absorbed by that superb Avenue whose moving pictures are apparently unwound from an endless film. In the early dusk of the November afternoon the shop-windows glittered like so many immense jewel-boxes, filled to overflowing with temptations for the feminine purse. Above their heads, the great white arc-lights began to wink and splutter. Looking down from the higher ground where they now walked the throng of pedestrians seemed a dark, solid mass which approaching split up into individuals sharply distinguished, but always with the dark, solid mass beyond. Many if not all classes of the community were therein represented: respectable poverty and equally respectable wealth; successful vice, flaunting in plumes and sables; unsuccessful vice, brazening or slinking along in threadbare imitation finery. Here shambled one of those "below the bread-line," gazing apathetically at the well-fed; passed him quickly a young stock-broker,

dreaming of future millions. Strangest of all, perhaps, yet strong by force of numbers, swaggered the bourgeois in paint and powder and splendours often shoddy, imitating more or less accurately the show-girls of the musical-comedy stage. And in and out among the crowd like flying shuttles weaving its diverse threads together, darted newsboys shrieking their wares.

Sylvia was not imaginative enough to be observant. What she noticed were the jewels and flowers and sumptuous clothing in the shop-windows, the new Winter fashions indicated by the more richly dressed women. And underneath these familiar, conscious thoughts ran a novel current of which she was scarcely aware; anticipation of the probable meeting with Noel Maurice, decision to inspect him carefully, an increased desire to please.

The seed planted by Mrs. Dareth was sprouting a little more rapidly than that charming lady had intended, or perhaps desired.

As they pushed aside the curtain separating it from the shop in front and entered the small gallery where an exhibition of etchings was then in progress, Maurice sprang up from a divan and came to meet them.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "I began to be afraid you weren't coming."

"I thought we were quite on time." Vida Dareth's tone was indolent, but even those long-lashed, drooping eyelids of hers could not altogether hide the keenness of her glance.

The discrepancy between this admitted appointment and her remark that she would not be surprised should they meet Maurice, Sylvia was too nervous to perceive. An encounter with a man—any man—excited her, and this one had caused that undercurrent of thought.

Maurice bit his lip and his weak, handsome face darkened, became almost sullen. He looked a question at Mrs. Dareth, but her neutral expression was a mask, refusing response.

"What uninteresting things etchings are!" she went on in the same soft, indolent tone. "There's no appeal in this black and white—no emotion. I don't wonder there are so few people here."

"The place is really quite full sometimes." Maurice's defence from the implied criticism was both anxious and eager. Every trace of that insolent egotism with which he had answered Dr. Macneven had vanished from his bearing.

Vida Dareth ignored his excuse. "I'm so tired!" she said. "I simply wasn't fit to come. We've been rushing around all day."

Rushing, her manner hinted, having been but compliance with the dictates of duty.

"Sit down here and rest." He carefully installed her upon one of the red-plush seats and bending over her, added very low: "Is there anything wrong—any fresh trouble, I mean?"

"Hush!" she whispered; but her glance was grateful. Aloud she said: "Did you ever see anyone keep so fresh as Sylvia? Here we've been walking for hours and she doesn't even want to sit down. It must be splendid to have such a physique!"

She smiled up at the girl, knowing that she had made it impossible for her to profess fatigue.

"If Miss Farnham's colour is the result of walking, I'll advise my models to do six miles a day," Maurice answered promptly.

Sylvia's roses deepened at the compliment. And the hint which had called it forth passed by her unnoticed.

"Don't stay here with me," Mrs. Dareth went on. "Go around and amuse yourselves while

I keep quiet." Her voice and her slender body alike drooped gracefully.

Sylvia of course protested, but her lukewarm objections were easily overruled.

"You're not leaving me alone at all: and I know you're crazy to see the pictures." If there was irony in that phrase, Sylvia at least was quite unaware of it. "Unless you go, I'll feel as though I ought to come with you, and I'm really far too tired. Please, dear!"

So Sylvia, her sensations a mixture of importance and self-conscious shyness, strolled about with Maurice, wondering whether the few people in the room knew that her companion was a soon-to-be-famous artist and agreeing with his rather perfunctory remarks in a way which led him to praise her excellent taste and decide that she was much prettier than he had at first thought her.

The woman on the red-plush seat watched them with furtive, restless eyes. In the shelter of her muff her gloved fingers were twisting nervously together; behind her smooth white forehead her busy brain questioned: "Was this indeed the best solution of the problem?" And defending the course she had chosen she told herself no other was possible—save one: and

that one she would not take. True, she was risking much now; tiptoeing amid pitfalls: but that other road led straight to the brink of a precipice.

Yet how good, how commendable, her motives were! It was the world's evil-mindedness, the world's lack of faith which drove her into tortuous byways. Ah, but life was made very difficult for the pure in heart, the noble in thought! Her smile when Maurice and Sylvia returned to her was angelic.

"If you've *quite* finished, dear," she said, "I think I'd better go home."

Which caused Sylvia to feel unpleasantly culpable.

It has been said, and truthfully, that Miss Farnham lacked imagination. Nevertheless, she was perfectly well able to picture to herself certain agreeable if materialistic scenes in which hers was the leading rôle. She was not exactly a husband-hunter, but like most girls of her type she looked upon every man she encountered as a possible mate, and marriage as her manifest and certain destiny. Mrs. Dareth's report, his own idle and somewhat banal compliments, spoken principally in order to avoid an awkward silence, had sufficed to

transfer Maurice from the ranks of the many possible into those of the few almost probable. She believed him to be attracted by her, and her flattering fancy made the step to adoration but a short one. She was not, however, at all sure that he would suit her, for her dreams were of wealth, and of luxuries heretofore vague, recently more clearly imagined. And Noel Maurice was poor. Of course, his prospects were excellent. . . .

Anyway, it would be great fun to have so good-looking and distinguished a man sighing for her. That he might find such a state of affairs not altogether pleasant was an idea which did not enter her limited range of vision. How all the girls she knew would talk and wonder! And wouldn't it be just thrilling to have people point to her as the reason why a great artist had never married!

She was one of those unfortunates who in a time of rapid transition belong to the moribund past: there are many like her here in New York at this present day. Anchored in some back-water of stagnant conventions they cling there firmly, closing eyes and ears to the powerful currents that sweep others along the ever-broadening stream of modernity; and if per-

chance a day comes when even by them the rush and roar of the great waters can no longer be ignored, denouncing with feeble violence the movement which disturbs the ancient moss and slime.

Sylvia heard nothing, felt nothing as yet; but the hour was fast approaching when she was to know the pull of the current, when she was to choose between the backwater and the turbulent, hopeful river.

CHAPTER FOURTH

“WHAT on earth made you bring that gawk of a girl with you Friday?” Noel Maurice demanded in a tone half-injured, half-angry, looking reproachfully at Mrs. Dareth across the tea-table which had been set in her drawing-room. He was there ostensibly to supervise the packing of the portrait, but the men who were to do the work had not arrived; possibly because they had been told to come at a considerably later date.

She finished filling the teacups, handed him his, and leaning back in her low cushion-piled chair stirred her own deliberately before she said: “I’m very fond of Sylvia.”

Maurice uttered an impatient exclamation. “Well——! But is that any reason for spoiling our afternoon?”

Mrs. Dareth selected a sandwich with an amount of care which did not tend to soothe his irritation. “My friend,” she replied languidly; “I regret to say that there are matters about which you seem a little slow of comprehension—not to say stupid.”

He frowned. "I'm sorry I bore you," he answered stiffly. "Perhaps I'd better go."

There was a good deal of the small boy left in Noel Maurice.

Mrs. Dareth smiled with a flash of white teeth, a little too small, a little too sharp, and put out a detaining hand. "Don't be angry! Who ever expected an artist to have any insight where the practical affairs of life are concerned?"

He took the slender hand and put it to his lips: there was an instant's pause before she drew it away and said gently: "Now sit down and drink your tea while I tell you why I brought Sylvia with me Friday. Take a sandwich—there, that's right."

But though he obeyed she did not at once proceed with the promised explanation. And he was well content to sit in silence, watching the light from the gas-lights upon the hearth play over her dark hair, lending a hint of colour to her white face, touching the rounded throat left bare by the filmy gown whose amber-tinted folds revealed every graceful line of the supple body. She looked very fragile, lying there among her silken cushions; very soft and pliable and helpless—a woman sure, he thought,

to appeal to any man's protective instinct. Any man save one; he remembered that one with a second's half-consciously dramatic clenching of his teeth.

At last she said in that sweet low voice of hers: "It wasn't nice of me to tease you just now, dear friend. And the truth is I like you all the better because you forget the contemptible things I have to remember. I'm glad you're big enough to overlook the baseness, the horrid crawling ideas—— Ah, if only we women were not so bound, so tied hand and foot by the pettinesses we don't dare to disregard!"

Naturally, the image of himself thus conjured up did not offend Maurice. He felt very strong and masculine as he answered the woman who so well knew how to play upon his weakness.

"Of course I see what you mean from a general standpoint. But in this connection——"

She raised her heavy lids and gave him a long slow look from the strange eyes whose yellow flecks the hue of her gown made more than usually apparent.

"It's just in this connection that we're tied most firmly. Forgive me; it's not easy for me to explain. But I must, if I want to save our

friendship." Her voice softened. "And I do want to save it, very much."

More puzzled than before, he demanded quickly: "What's threatening it? Has anyone said anything? Tell me all that's in your mind."

His thought had leaped to the one man—Julius Dareth.

She put aside her teacup and let her hands drop into her lap with a little gesture of resignation.

"Our friendship, dear Noel, is a sacred thing to both of us. We know how fine, how spiritual it is; but do you think the world would understand? And it is my duty to my husband—yes, and to myself!—not to give anyone a chance to—to think badly of me. Sylvia is very pretty; any man might enjoy her society——"

Vida Dareth's sweet voice trailed into silence. Perhaps she did not desire that her meaning should be too clear, even to herself.

Maurice did not reply. Presently he got up and went across the room to the portrait he had himself painted, yet which he often secretly wondered at. His back was towards Mrs. Dareth when he said in a queer, muffled tone: "Are you telling me to make love to Miss Farnham?"

She gave a little cry of protest, dismayed by his direct speaking.

"Oh, how could you think such a thing of me? Noel, how could you?" Her voice broke piteously.

He was by her side in an instant, longing but not daring to take her in his arms and comfort her.

"Forgive me—please forgive me! I didn't understand; and I've hurt you. What a brute I am! Hurt you—why, I'd sooner cut off my right hand. Look up, dear! Smile at me—say you know I didn't mean it." The best and the worst of him spoke in that appeal.

She did look up then, and smiled at him very gently. Her long lashes were wet; his excitement caused her nerves to vibrate most agreeably.

"Of course you didn't. It was all my fault—but it's so difficult for me to explain these hateful things. Oh, if you only knew what it's cost me to learn to think of them!" She gave a pretty little shiver of disgust. "I simply meant that if we three were seen together—if you and Sylvia were known to be on pleasant terms—there couldn't be any horrid gossip. Even if people were to exaggerate and say you were

attentive to her it wouldn't do any harm; now would it?"

Who could have resisted so soft and yet so reasonable a plea? Not Noel Maurice—as Mrs. Dareth was well aware.

"No, no. Of course not. You're absolutely right and I was a fool not to guess why you brought her without forcing you to say anything." In his present penitent mood he was ready to accede to her every suggestion.

"I ought not to be so absurdly sensitive," she sighed.

"You're perfect!" he protested. "You make me think of an exquisite, gauzy-winged sprite. But I'm nothing more than an ordinary mortal, dear fay, and my fingers are too coarse to touch even the hem of your cloak without tearing it."

She smiled at him again, well content, and the half hour before he was obliged to leave sped quickly. It was with a joyful promise to dine there on the following evening that he at last bade her good-bye.

"I'm going to ask Sylvia," Vida Dareth said as she gave him her hand in farewell. "She's a dear, sweet child and I want you to like her."

Maurice felt that he was indeed forgiven, and when the front door closed behind him he went

whistling down the street. He was young, and until his chance introduction to Mrs. Dareth he had known no women save those of the little, provincial town where he was born and the *grisettes* of his student days in Paris.

Mrs. Dareth rang for the waitress to remove the tea-things and slowly ascended the stairs to her own room. Doubts as to the wisdom of her course were again assailing her, but she refused to consider them. Another problem must be dealt with in a few minutes; she wanted to give it her undivided attention, and besides, she had enjoyed her afternoon. It was longer than she had expected, and she had had plenty of time to change from her tea-gown to a semi-evening dress before that second problem presented itself, embodied in her husband.

She was in her dressing-room—the house was an old-fashioned, high-stooped brownstone, with sitting-room in front, bedroom at the back, and two dressing-rooms in between—fastening the last hooks on her gown and wishing for the thousandth time that she had a maid, when Dareth entered.

“Julius dear, how late you are!” she exclaimed, putting her hands on his shoulders and lifting her face to his.

He bent and touched her cheek with his lips; it was a caress purely perfunctory. And she realised once more what she had frequently been made to realise during the past few years—that the weapon of sex she used so adroitly, the weapon with which she had formerly found it easy to control and subdue her husband, was now, in so far as he was concerned, a broken reed. Then since her beauty, her lithe grace had lost their power over him, she must employ other means to obtain what she wanted. She possessed them; only they were more trouble to use.

“I hope I haven’t kept you waiting,” remarked Dareth civilly, as he turned into his dressing-room. He knew he was not late, but he needed something to say.

Vida sighed. Viewed thus in concrete form, the problem appeared wearisomely difficult. She decided to put off further proceedings until after dinner, and it was over the coffee that she said: “By the way, Julius, when are those Chicago people coming?”

He glanced across at her quickly.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kean?” He seldom wasted words.

“Yes.” She hesitated. “Didn’t you say

something about wanting to ask them to dinner?"

Before his steady look her eyes dropped. She began to stir her coffee rather nervously; and she wondered why it was that Julius so often made her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"I thought you objected to the trouble of entertaining them? If I remember rightly you suggested my taking them to a restaurant." His voice was even, absolutely colourless.

"Oh no, dear! You must have forgotten or—well, you know you often catch up some foolish phrase of mine and misconstrue it." She smiled at him, a very Griselda. "I don't believe they'd care about a restaurant dinner. They live in a hotel, don't they?"

"I think so." His direct, contemplative gaze never wavered.

The sound of her own words had given her courage; she went on: "Of course, do just as you please, dear. He's your friend or associate or whatever you call it, not mine. But it does seem to me it would be more of a compliment to ask them here."

"Have you lost your fondness for restaurants?" There was a sting in the perfectly even, perfectly polite tone.

"No indeed. I'm only considering how I can best serve your interests."

"Thank you." And now the inflection had become undisguisedly ironic.

Perhaps she failed to notice it, though that seems improbable. Certainly no frown marred the smooth brow, nor was there so much as a flicker of the long eyelashes to hint at anger or even annoyance. She continued suavely:

"Then it's decided that we invite them here to dinner? Will the eighteenth suit you?" She had forgotten her opening question.

"Very well, if it fits in with your own plans."

His watchful eyes had become amused, for his memory was better than hers.

"Oughtn't we to ask a few people to meet them? How about the Wades and Sylvia and Mr. Maurice?"

She gave him a carefully careless glance as she ran over the names. He appeared quite unperturbed. And she was at once relieved and most illogically offended.

"Kean is very anxious to meet Dr. Macneven."

Julius Dareth never spoke to his wife of the doctor as Alan or Dr. Mac—the name by which he was affectionately known to a goodly number

of his patients—but invariably used the formal title.

“Then I’ll have to get another girl—however, that’s easily managed. The eighteenth, at—shall we say half-past seven? Only, Julius dear . . .”

She hesitated. She had reached the point towards which she had been steering throughout their talk; and she was more than a little apprehensive.

“Well?” he remarked when her pause had lasted for several seconds. But he knew what was coming.

“I do hate to bother you about money, Julius. Still, now that prices have gone up so terribly I’m afraid you haven’t any idea how difficult it is for me to get along. I simply can’t screw the cost of this dinner out of my regular allowance—and I ought to have a new evening gown, too. I wouldn’t say a word if it were just on my own account, but it can’t be good for your business to have people like these Keans see your wife looking shabby and out of date.”

She hoped she had made refusal impossible; though with Julius one never could be sure.

“Oh, I see.” Again the ironic inflection curved his tone. “All right, then. You want—

say seventy-five dollars for the dinner, and two or three times that amount to keep the Keans from pitying your rags?"

"You think me extravagant, Julius, simply because you don't understand," she replied with the dignity of injured innocence.

"I understand that it takes over fifteen thousand dollars a year to maintain the two of us," he answered a trifle grimly.

"And surely that's little enough! I only ask you to be reasonable, Julius. I've given up expecting you to have any consideration for *me*. It's my misfortune to feel such unkindness very deeply, that's all."

She put her tiny lace handkerchief to her eyes, and wondered whether any man save this one would have sat there unmoved when he might if he chose kiss away her tears.

"To return to practical matters," said Dar-eth quietly. "I'll give you a cheque for three hundred, and it's your affair to make it go as far as you can."

She dried her not very wet eyes in resigned silence. His tone was final, and she had obtained more than she had hoped for.

But when on the following evening Maurice arrived somewhat ahead of time she met him

with a sad, appealing look which instantly aroused his concern. It was not, however, until after he had questioned her for several minutes that she said:

"I didn't sleep at all last night. I had to ask Julius for money to meet extra expenses, expenses he had forced on me, and the result——!" She shuddered, and was silent.

The exclamation he repressed may have been an oath.

"Help me to laugh and seem happy to-night," she entreated softly. "I ought not to have told even you my trouble, but when your heart aches as mine does, it's difficult to hide the pain from a dear friend." Her eyes were misty, for she was herself convinced of the truth of her words the instant they had crossed her lips. "Most women, I suppose, would run up bills and get the better of a man that way. Unfortunately, I have a sense of honour. Here's Sylvia! She mustn't know there's anything wrong—she thinks I'm perfectly happy. Ah, *mon ami*——!"

She greeted the young girl warmly; and while she smiled and chatted Maurice thought how brave she was, how superbly well she played her difficult part.

A moment or two after Sylvia's entrance,

Julius Dareth appeared, accompanied by Dr. Macneven.

"I met the doctor down-town," he told his wife, "and made him come back with me."

"I'm so glad!" Vida exclaimed, giving her fragile hand into the doctor's strong clasp. "It's not often we find you with an hour to spare, Dr. Macneven."

In truth, she by no means regarded his present freedom as a piece of good fortune. Impossible for her to have explained why, but she was never quite at ease with this virile, straightforward man. He had upon her, spiritually, the same effect that a bright frosty day had physically; he made her feel shrivelled. Nevertheless, she placed him beside her at the dinner-table and talked about the increased cost of living with—apparently—the deepest interest, while Maurice, fired by her noble example, devoted himself to Sylvia.

He had given a good deal of thought to Mrs. Dareth's plan of an ostensibly triple alliance, thought influenced partly by remorse, partly by a desire to please her, and resolved to follow it. He was not, however, possessed of either sufficient skill or natural adroitness to tread successfully the very narrow line she had

marked out for him, and overstepped it continually. Sylvia's prettiness made flirtation all too easy, and he failed to take into proper account the naïveté which caused her to accept as serious what an older girl or one of any social experience would have recognized as merely a way of passing an agreeable hour.

She looked particularly charming now as she blushed and dimpled, venturing an occasional shy retort to Maurice's badinage. And in the pleasure of watching her Alan Macneven, M.D., occasionally lost the thread of Mrs. Dareth's discourse.

It chanced that Sylvia, glancing across the table, met his eyes; and the rose-colour in her cheeks deepened and she stopped in the very middle of a sentence, while the doctor for the first time in many years felt embarrassed, and strove to hide the novel sensation by plunging into a flood of talk that surprised his auditors . . . and himself. Candle-light and flowers and a pair of soft, innocent blue eyes—of such are the foundations of dreams. And dreams dominate the world.

That same evening Vida Dareth, her guests gone, sat down in the low chair before her silver and crystal strewn toilet table and gave her-

self to reverie—reverie diversified by admiration for the image she saw in the glass and commiseration for the noble soul whose exterior semblance it was.

Fate, she thought, had treated her harshly—far more harshly than she deserved. With her cleverness and good looks she had a right to expect wealth, social position, power. Instead her lot was hopelessly middle-class. Was it her fault, then, that she found life empty, that boredom weighed heavily upon her? Certainly not! What if she had grasped at and encouraged Noel Maurice's—well, friendship—as a means of filling the long hours? She had nothing else to do. Everything might have been so different had not Julius disappointed her! She had loved him once, she carefully reminded herself, as only women of such intense, finely wrought feeling as hers were capable of loving. But he was a man quite without—she groped for a word—quite without temperament, unable to respond to the necessary demands of a nature like her own. And he did not make, he probably never would make more than a decent income, thus forbidding her even the hope of eventually escaping from the limitations of her existence into a higher social

sphere. She sighed deeply. Life was indeed cruel, especially to those whose emotions and desires were keener than any the common herd could know! How her affection for Noel Maurice would be misunderstood by most people, themselves incapable of anything so spiritual, so flawlessly beautiful! If Julius knew how much of her time and confidence she gave Noel, what might he *not* think? Yet she was absolutely blameless. It was he whose coarse ideas blinded him to the more delicate shades of feeling.

She had made a terrible mistake in marrying him. But her principles were far too high to permit of her attempting to rectify it, apart from the discomforts such a proceeding would involve. No: though she disliked him, though he treated her with brutal indifference, she would never seek release—not even if he gave her grounds for a New York divorce. There was something nobler than that “self-respect” about which those dreadful modern women talked. And the courts are so penurious in the matter of alimony!

She had been wise, she reflected, in choosing Sylvia. Maurice had no taste for the unsophisticated *jeune fille*, though he might occa-

sionally amuse himself as he had done that evening. It would be very wrong to subject him to any temptation that could possibly result in his ruining his career by a foolish marriage. Besides, she was really fond of Sylvia. The poor girl was rather stupid, but that wasn't her fault and she had wit enough to admire if not to appreciate Vida Dareth. It would be a genuine kindness to mould Sylvia's character, removing her illusions with the gentleness of one who had suffered through the ruthless rending away of her own. As for Noel Maurice . . .

Well, to him she would always remain an ideal before which he knelt, unattainable but adored. There should be in the future as there had been during the past month or two, many breathless moments to relieve the tedium of her life. Pleasant little thrills of remembered excitement coursed over her nerves. How exquisite was such a communion of kindred souls!

To keep one's eyes fast closed while insisting to one's self that they are wide open is a not infrequently used method of avoiding unpleasant truths, a method in the employment of which long and constant practice had given Vida Dareth considerable skill.

A WOMAN OF FEELING 67

Wearied of reversal she amused herself by trying the effect of her heavy tresses when wound in diverse ways about her head. This occupation proved so absorbing that she forgot all else and left it only for bed.

CHAPTER FIFTH

THAT the wall of opinion wherewith Mrs. Dareth intended to fortify her somewhat precarious position might be strong and secure it was by no means enough for her to have convinced Sylvia and Maurice. Other people must assist to render it invulnerable and she lost no opportunity of providing them with the preconceptions she might some day find it convenient for them to have. This she called telling her friends the truth, whenever conscience pricked her into questioning any of her own words or actions. An occasion admirably suited to this form of truth-telling came a few days later, when with about a dozen other women she lunched at Mrs. Wade's.

This lady could scarcely be called an ideal hostess—at least in her choice of guests. With the solitary exception of Mrs. Dareth, who knew most of them, few of those present had met before or would desire ever to meet again. It was indeed perfectly evident that they had each and every one been invited for the same and single reason—they had “entertained”

Mrs. Wade. Nevertheless, there was not much diversity of type or opinion; they all belonged to the class which has a comfortable income, grows stout, is anti-everything, especially suffrage, and has just begun to discover that servants and ailments are not regarded as the best topics of conversation among what they love to describe as "the smart set." Themselves possessed of few others, they find that this fact adds greatly to life's difficulties.

Talk about the weather began the long and indigestible meal; with the soup it moved to the current fashions and clung there until the ices were served. The favourite phrase was "they say." It was not an especially exhilarating festivity, and Vida Dareth was bored.

"They say the 1830 styles are comin' back in the Spring," remarked Mrs. Sykes for the tenth time.

"I tell Sylvia they'll be just the thing for her," said Mrs. Dareth, smilingly resolved to get some profit out of this rather tepid gaiety. "By the way, Mrs. Sykes, have you ever met my little cousin Sylvia—Sylvia Farnham?"

"I have," announced Mrs. Wade in a tone of superiority. "And I thought her a very sweet girl."

"You're not the only one who thinks so!" The significance of Mrs. Dareth's laugh could not have been missed even by the dullest.

"I suppose she's got a lot of fellows after her," said fat, good-natured Mrs. Sykes, vainly trying to resist temptation in the shape of fancy cakes.

"I have to play chaperon," responded Mrs. Dareth, carefully avoiding a direct answer. She disliked to tell fibs, and rather prided herself upon her truthfulness. If her remarks sometimes gave people wrong impressions that, of course, was their affair, not hers. "I have to play chaperon—Mrs. Farnham hates society—and I can assure you I have my hands full. I'm very fond of Sylvia, though, and I like to take her about with me."

"I expect you'll get her off before long," said Mrs. Wade with the kindest intentions. "She's very attractive."

Mrs. Wade's own daughter had married at nineteen.

"Yes, I know. Of course, she's hardly more than a child as yet. Still, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid . . ." A smile and a sigh concluded the sentence.

"I saw a young gentleman with you and she the other day," said Mrs. Curtis, her ever-ready curiosity aroused.

"When was it?"

Mrs. Curtis hesitated. "I'm not quite sure. Thursday, I guess."

"Oh, that was Mr. Maurice." Such rapid certainty might elsewhere have provoked suspicions, but Vida Dareth understood her audience. "You know—the man who painted my portrait."

"Yes—yes, of course." Mrs. Curtis fidgeted on her chair, guiltily conscious that she had not been to see the picture. "Very clever—very clever indeed."

Mrs. Dareth glanced at the speaker from beneath lids half closed to hide the amusement in her eyes. Mrs. Curtis's prevarications were always ludicrously transparent.

"Between you and I," remarked ponderous Mrs. Sykes, "between you and I, I'm mighty glad I haven't any daughters. What with the high cost of livin' and the gentlemen bein' so spoiled, it ain't easy nowadays to get a girl settled. That's why so many of 'em are runnin' round tryin' to act like men."

With this comprehensive explanation of the

causes of the present feminine unrest the luncheon came to an end.

Mrs. Dareth was well pleased; she had forestalled gossip and as she told herself, done dear Sylvia a good turn. In that little section of a particular class which was Vida Dareth's world a girl's value, she knew, depended altogether upon her matrimonial possibilities. She realised that outside it might perhaps be different; but the big, busy universe about and beyond her sheltered nook scarcely existed for her. It was something one occasionally read of; no more.

December passed and the New Year came, bringing with it that intense cold which was to make its first months memorable ones in the annals of New York. Bitter winds and a mercury hovering around the zero point meant discomfort even among the well-to-do, though there were some who, like Sylvia, enjoyed the cold and pronounced it great fun. But there was more than discomfort and no fun at all in it for the poor.

Into municipal lodging-houses, Bowery missions, and Salvation Army shelters thronged the homeless until such refuges could hold no more. A few churches opened their doors;

jails and hospitals were crowded to their utmost capacity; and still the death-list grew. But of the illness and the suffering amongst those a little higher up in the social scale there is no record. Drunkenness and crime increased—the saloons were bright and well heated: vice flourished; for when the wind bit through insufficient clothing until its icy fangs seemed to penetrate to the very soul, girl after girl, benumbed and exhausted, “sold out” for the means of warmth.

Those weeks drew lines on Alan Macneven’s forehead and around his generous mouth, removed the last few ounces of spare flesh from his big frame, and mingled more grey with his stubby brown hair. For he was in the thick of that fight to neutralise the power of the cold which certain large-hearted men and women waged valiantly, if with very incomplete success. Margaret Lane, while doing her own part thoroughly and well, watched him anxiously, for he never spared himself and disease was rampant.

Mrs. Dareth objected to the cold, declared it made her miserable, and refused to go out save in a carriage. Enveloping herself in furs, she complained a good deal and seemed to have

a fixed belief that the bitter weather existed for her express annoyance. Otherwise, she was tolerably content with her life despite occasional fits of boredom. In Sylvia she had at last found a companion whom she could summon at any moment, one ready and glad to come to lunch or tea, to go with her to reception or *matinée*. The young girl's daily routine had held but rare amusements, while her parents' amiable if unwise desire to make everything easy for her had prevented her having any regular or gainful occupation. Like many other estimable persons they regarded work as an evil to be avoided if possible. So Sylvia looked upon Mrs. Dareth as a sort of Fairy Godmother: the question which perplexed her was whether Noel Maurice was or was not to have the rôle of Prince Charming.

For Vida Dareth's advice and example had already diminished his fitness in Sylvia's eyes for this important part. She had quickly learned the lesson few find difficult—what money can do to smooth and embellish one's path. Born and brought up in a cramped apartment where the strictest economy was a matter of course, Mrs. Dareth's house and mode of living were a revelation to her. To sit at a

daintily spread table and be served by a trained waitress, never to wonder or care whether enough was left from Sunday's chicken to provide Tuesday's breakfast, to throw away a pair of gloves at the very first rip, and always wear silk stockings had at the beginning seemed to Sylvia the height of luxury. And now she knew that Vida was not satisfied; that able to indulge in frequent taxi-cabs she sighed for her own motor, and possessed of four servants declared she needed six—all of which made Sylvia feel that an income like the Dareths' couldn't be anything unusual, and that willingly to accept less was to prove great self-abnegation. Of course, Noel Maurice had prospects; though, as Mrs. Dareth often remarked, it would probably be years before they came to materialisation.

"He really ought," she said one day when Sylvia was lunching with her, "he really ought to marry a rich girl. But he's a typical artist—utterly impractical."

"I don't believe he'd marry for money," replied Sylvia with spirit, if somewhat bromidically.

"My dear child, don't talk like a sentimental novel. What I meant was that it would be a

very good thing for him if he fell in love with a rich girl. It is possible, you know, for a girl with money to be quite as attractive as one who hasn't a cent." There was a shade of reproach in Mrs. Dareth's tone—just enough to make Sylvia a trifle compunctious. "And I'm thinking of his wife's happiness too. He wants everything about him to be exquisite—he'd soon be repelled by a woman who looked hot and flustered, or whose hands showed that she did housework and washed the dishes. His sensibilities are extraordinarily keen—and keen sensibilities and poverty, my dear Sylvia, don't go well in double harness. Try some of that cheese with your salad; it's a new kind and I'm sure you'll like it."

Sylvia, thinking this over later, felt that Vida Dareth was no doubt right. None the less did she continue to find Maurice's attentions, which her inexperience exaggerated, flattering and delightful—a situation to which Mrs. Dareth was by no means blind. But then, as she often said to herself, what could she do? Certainly not make any impertinent attempt to regulate Maurice's behaviour for him! The present state of affairs was very agreeable; but she was too clever a woman even to try to deafen

herself to those rumblings of approaching tempest which though far off now were slowly, steadily drawing nearer. The problem perplexing her subconsciousness was how and where to find a refuge for herself when the storm broke. Whatever happened, she thought with a shrug of her graceful shoulders, she was sure to be blamed! Yet she had acted in the most admirable manner—been kindness itself to poor, pretty Sylvia, a true friend to Noel Maurice, and endured her husband's heartlessness with exemplary patience. She sighed as she reflected upon the unreasonableness of other people. Why, they might go so far as to accuse her of using Sylvia to screen her own flirtation with Maurice! Decidedly, life was difficult even for one who only asked that the hours might pass pleasantly and nothing occur to annoy her.

She sighed again, snuggling down among the many pillows of the sofa she had drawn in front of the grate where gas-logs glowed. The heat flushed her rather pale cheeks; she was conscious of looking very pretty in her house-gown of opal-tinted *crêpe-de-chine* bordered with soft brown fur. Outside, the high wind drove the snow against the windows in thick icy masses and rushed shrieking around the

corners. Though still afternoon, it was quite dark; only the snow made a weird white glare. The wind was rising, the cold increasing steadily: it promised to be an exceptionally bad night even for this terrible Winter. Vida Dareth clasped her hands behind her head and turned a little on her pillows, luxuriating in the contrast between the ease and warmth which were hers and the storm that howled outside. She was not in the mood to welcome any interference with her comfort, when the sound of her husband's somewhat harsh voice broke her semi-dozze. Was ever woman so martyred! Why couldn't she be let alone?

"Come in here, Alan," he was saying. "You must be half frozen and there's probably a fire."

"Thanks, I won't go too near it," the doctor's deep bass answered.

Mrs. Dareth realised that the dim light and the high back of the sofa combined to shelter her from observation. And she did not make her presence known.

"Well, sit down anyway, and tell me what you want."

"Money, of course. The fact is"—Dr. Macneven spoke with evident reluctance—"the fact

is I'm cleaned out. And those people have got to be helped."

"Just who and what are they? I couldn't hear half you said coming along. Too much wind."

"The father worked on a skyscraper, and was crushed when a beam fell. I knew him—decent, hard-working, skilled man he was too—and got him into the F—— Hospital. He died there. Don't think he wanted to live when he found out how maimed he'd be; and his wife's been trying to take care of herself and the two children ever since. Things went from bad to worse, of course. I've been so driven the last few weeks I lost sight of them, but to-day I ran across them again—in a cellar. No fire, pretty much everything gone, and—well, God knows how long it is since they've had enough to eat! I hustled them out and fixed them up for a while with some friends of mine, and I'm hunting a job for the mother. But they've got to be looked after in the meantime or the children'll be carted off to some institution and then——"

"I'll give you a cheque," said Dareth quietly. After a brief pause he added in a different tone and with an obvious effort: "I'm glad you came

to me about this. I—I can spare a little every now and then, and I'd rather have you handle it than turn it over to some society. Don't speak of it to anyone, though." He paused again; and in an even, inflectionless voice: "Not to anyone, please."

Vida Dareth shut her lips tightly together, repressing an exclamation. And only the day before he had refused to increase her allowance! No wonder he didn't want her to know he was throwing away money!

Her righteous wrath caused her to miss the doctor's reply. What she next heard was her husband's: "There's something out of balance, somewhere. I don't know what it is, but lately I've begun to feel as if—well, as if I ought to try to help the fellow who's got the wrong end of the deal."

"You're not the only one. It's in the air, that feeling of personal responsibility—of not having any right just to take and enjoy. There's the 'phone."

Mrs. Dareth heard her husband go across the room to the extension on a table in one corner. "Hello! Hello! Yes, he's here. Hold the wire a minute. They want you, Alan."

Then the doctor: "Hello! Yes. Yes. I'll

be around in ten minutes. Is Brainerd there? All right."

The receiver clicked on the hook. "It's the hospital," Dr. Macneven explained. "There's to be a consultation in a hurry. I must run."

"Wait a minute till I draw that cheque. And I say, Alan, can't you come to dinner to-morrow night?" Dareth's tone was urgent. "I understand that Farnham girl's to be here. I'll need help," he ended with a chuckle. "That's the way to get you, I know."

"I'll try to manage it. And if you spent your day among the kind of sights I have in front of me all the time you'd find it a mighty pleasant change to look at a pretty girl like Miss Farnham. Thanks, old fellow. Good night!"

An instant more and the outer door slammed.

So that was the way Dr. Macneven's money went! And now Julius intended to follow his example. No doubt these people were frauds—all such riff-raff were frauds. Didn't even the charity societies tell you never to give anything to beggars? And weren't they taxed to support schools and homes and asylums and goodness only knew what else? That widow—a shameless creature, probably, who laughed at

the doctor for letting her impose on him! Unless—and Vida Dareth smiled to herself, lying there basking in the warmth, and felt very clever and sophisticated as the ugly thought crossed her mind—unless, being still young, she paid with her body instead of with coin! All men were like that, and Dr. Macneven no doubt quite as bad as anyone else in spite of his talk and his great reputation. But what on earth had gotten into Julius to make him “feel as if he ought to try to help the fellow who had the wrong end of the deal”? And how large was that cheque? He wouldn’t dare to give very much! Queer he didn’t like Sylvia, when the doctor . . .

Mrs. Dareth’s annoyance died away as a new idea flashed into her brain. Could it be arranged? And why not? At least, came the submerged thought she would not allow to rise to the conscious surface of her mind, at least well enough to save you from reproach—to keep your conscience perfectly clear.

Even Dr. Macneven’s avowed admiration was not of her fostering but had sprung into life unaided. So why not encourage—and, perhaps, use it? Besides, Julius liked his society, and it was her duty as a loyal wife to try to please

her husband. She thrilled with sincere admiration for her own surprising virtue. But how stupid of him to make such a mistake! Surely she had told him Margaret Lane was coming on the following evening. And now she would have to ask Sylvia too. If only Margaret could be put off! But at any rate, Sylvia must come. Fortunately she rarely had any engagement.

Would it be wise to let Julius know that she had overheard his talk with the doctor? Naturally she hadn't meant to listen; she wasn't an eavesdropper! It might be difficult, though, to convince Julius; he was so suspicious—horrid quality!—and he always liked to believe the worst of her. He hadn't even been grateful to her for her willingness to entertain his dreadful Chicago friends! And now that, their visit to New York having been postponed, she had spent the money he had provided for the dinner which would eventually have to be given—well, if he persisted in being stingy she would have to fall back on her credit. The idea of his denying her, and then squandering money on a lot of dirty little gutter-snipes!

She yawned and shifted her position, raising one white arm so that with the loose sleeve

fallen away she might the better admire its delicate roundness, the sheen of the satiny skin. How strange that any man—even Julius!—should be able to refuse her anything she wanted! If he were just a little less insensible—he had been her slave once! And the memory of her unsuccessful attempts to re-establish her power was very bitter.

Few people, seeing her as she looked when presiding over her dinner-table the following evening, could have avoided wondering, had they known of it, at her husband's indifference. Gowned in clinging, filmy black, with a strand of the best fish-skin pearls clasping her lovely throat and a single deep red flower fastened among the puffs and curls of her dead-leaf brown hair, she was alluring enough to enthrall the coldest. Near her Margaret Lane was like a weed placed beside an orchid. Only Sylvia, in a many-times altered blue dress which matched her eyes, held her own by the right divine of her fresh and glowing youth.

Dr. Macneven, too tired to eat, felt as though there were something unreal about it all: the damask-spread table, where silver and crystal gleamed under the soft light of shaded candles and the centre-piece of richly perfumed crimson

roses made a splash of gorgeous colour; the idle talk and yet more idle laughter; the over-abundant food that was half wasted, eaten without being wanted or left untouched. For days he had been spending most of his time among those whose next meal was problematical, whom want hourly confronted. Mrs. Dareth reached out to straighten a candle-shade; the diamonds on her slender fingers caught the light and flashed into a thousand colours. And the doctor thought of other hands he had seen that day; hands gnarled and twisted, wasted and bloodless. They seemed to be all around him, pleading just for a chance to live. . . .

“What are you dreaming about, doctor? I’m ready to give twice the customary penny for your thoughts.”

Vida Dareth’s languid voice coming at that precise moment startled the doctor out of his habitual quiet poise. Perhaps his nerves had been a little overstrained, for he turned to her with the blunt, unconventional truth:

“I was thinking what a pity it is that some people should have too much to eat and others not enough.”

The words fell thudding into the sensuous peace of the room. For a moment they were

all too completely taken aback to say anything. Then Sylvia exclaimed:

“But no one need go hungry in New York! It’s only in India and China and such uncivilised places that people can’t get enough to eat.”

The youthful assurance of her tone made Dr. Macneven smile imperceptibly.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken about that,” he said gently.

“You mean to say that people are starving, now, to-night, here in this city?” cried Sylvia, staring at him with wide-open, astonished blue eyes.

“Yes. To-night, and in this city,” he answered.

“But that’s too awful! Something ought to be done about it right away!”

Dr. Macneven looked at the pretty, flushed face with an approval he did not attempt to conceal. How warm-hearted she was, how quick to tenderness and pity! That she should be ignorant was natural; so young, so perfectly well and happy, it could not be expected that she should have any understanding of life’s grim facts. But what depths of womanly sympathy she had revealed, lying beneath the girl-

ish gaiety and charm, and only waiting to be called forth!

It was at this moment that Alan Macneven's imagination first began to endow Sylvia with the qualities he most admired in women.

"Of course it's perfectly heartrending, but if people will drink and be idle and wasteful, why, they must expect to suffer for it," remarked Mrs. Dareth, shaking her pretty head so that the long earrings hanging from her little ears jingled faintly. "We must have faith, though, that it's all for the best."

The sharp retort on the doctor's lips was checked by a glance from Margaret Lane, who asked quietly:

"Have you ever been to a settlement or done any kind of social work, Vida?"

"Oh dear no! I can't stand dreadful things . . . I'm much too sensitive."

"Well, one day last week I was down at the Open House and a woman came in . . ."

"Oh, Margaret, please!" cried Mrs. Dareth with uplifted, protesting hands. "What is the use of talking about horrors? Do let's change the subject. Have any of you been to hear 'The Moonshine Girl'?"

Dr. Macneven saw Sylvia's delicate brows

draw together in a troubled expression. "She's taken what I said to heart," he thought, "and it's bothering her. I'd like to know just what she thinks of it! Perhaps I can manage to have a quiet little talk with her by-and-by."

Sylvia's face told no falsehood. She was indeed perplexed and greatly worried. Was it possible that in spite of all her care she had made a mistake and actually used the wrong fork?

CHAPTER SIXTH

"OH, Sylvia darling, how sweet you look!" Mrs. Dareth emphasised the cooing note in her voice a trifle too strongly; but Sylvia's ears were not keen.

"I wish I was a little thinner," she replied discontentedly. "Somehow when I'm with you I always feel so—so *fat*! And I can't wear my clothes the way you do yours."

Vida Dareth smiled; admiration never failed to please her. But those curious, yellow-flecked eyes of hers were watchful.

"Nonsense!" she answered lightly, yet with a certain tang in her tone which betrayed an underlying bitterness. "That's only a matter of practice. It would be a pity if we women didn't have some sort of compensation for getting towards middle-age! But where did the violets come from?"

Sylvia blushed, glancing down at the flowers pinned on the front of her jacket. "Mr. Maurice sent them."

"In mid-Winter? How terribly extravagant of him!" No one would have guessed from

Mrs. Dareth's words and manner that she had herself suggested the gift. Not directly; but so subtly, so delicately that she was hardly aware of the parentage of the idea.

"Yes, wasn't it? I wish he wouldn't do such things," replied Sylvia, inwardly greatly pleased to think that Maurice had spent on her more than he could afford, though had anyone accused her of harbouring such a sensation her denial would have been both vehement and sincere.

It was the final day of the exhibition, and Vida Dareth had asked Sylvia to go with her "and see what had been sold." Not that either of them cared; only it provided an excellent excuse for meeting Maurice and going to tea at an hotel. He was waiting for them and they all three sat down at a short distance from the portrait, in front of which stood two youths with long hair and flowing neckties, making comments intended for the edification of anyone who might chance to be in the room.

"Just listen to them!" Maurice whispered. "What they don't know . . ."

"The quality I especially admire," announced the more bare-throated of the two, "is the artist's disdain of his medium. He

thrills you with his contempt for the paint and canvas he is obliged to use! He is searching for a soul—what is mere technique to him?"

"Something he hasn't mastered yet," was Maurice's muttered comment.

The other youth shook his head woefully.

"Always, always the material medium conflicting with the inner vision!" he sighed.

"Conflicting? Nay, deflecting it!"

Then they moved on, to pause enraptured before an impressionistic landscape of pale blue which looked, according to Maurice, as though the artist had filled sponges with paint and flung them at the canvas.

"Whether that splotch in the background is a cloud or a cow, I'm sure I don't know," he ended.

"It looks so awfully lumpy," ventured Sylvia, her shy smile deprecating her temerity.

"My portrait does too, in spots. Disdain paint and canvas! Not until I know how to use them." His face darkened. The emotional experiences of the past few months might ultimately injure him or they might do him good; the one thing certain was that they had already done more even than had various professional rebuffs to diminish his egotism.

“And then?” murmured Sylvia with half-intentional, half-unconscious coquetry.

He leaned towards her, looking into her eyes. And he knew that for what he was doing he must pay later, in those hours when self-contempt would sting his very soul, when the thing he was fast becoming appeared before him in all its ugly reality and grinned and girded at him. It was all part of the price. He was willing to pay, but—how much more would be required of him?

“Then—then perhaps I’ll have courage enough to ask to be allowed to paint you.” Some faint reflection from the tumult in his heart and brain gave a curious vividness to his tone.

Sylvia’s ready blush made her prettier than ever; she bent her head in charming confusion. And across that bowed head Noel Maurice and Vida Dareth exchanged a swift significant glance.

“I don’t know how you two feel,” said Mrs. Dareth presently, holding up the tiny, jewel-studded watch on her wrist, “but I’m starving and I want some tea.”

“So do I. We’ll go and get it this minute,” Maurice replied, springing to his feet. “What

do you say, Miss Farnham? Are you ready for tea?"

"Oh, I'm always hungry," the girl confessed naïvely.

Yet as they passed out of the room it was Sylvia who turned for one more look at the smiling portrait. And it seemed to her now that those yellow-flecked eyes followed her with an expression for which her limited vocabulary could find no name. She shivered a little as she hurried after the others. And she felt suddenly, unaccountably depressed.

But when they turned out of the side street into the crowded Avenue her depression vanished as swiftly as it had come. The lights, the people, the glitter and display, the automobile horns, the hundreds of voices, the stir and movement and colour, the nervous, feverish quality of it all sent pleasant little vibrations running through her. She liked to feel herself a part of this hurrying life; and the question, "Whence and whither?" had never troubled her, did not trouble her now.

Then amid the multitude of strange faces a familiar one appeared. She did not know whether she was glad or sorry when, in re-

sponse to Mrs. Dareth's beckoning nod, Dr. Macneven joined them.

"Come and have tea with us"—as she spoke Vida Dareth skilfully manœuvred the doctor to her side, while Maurice found himself with Sylvia—"please do! We need another man so badly. Or rather," she added laughingly, "*I* need one."

She had planted a thorn in Alan Macneven's flesh; whether wittingly or unwittingly, she could hardly have told. The easiest person in the world to deceive is one's self—for a time, at least.

They exchanged a few commonplaces as they sauntered along, but not many, for the interest of each was centred in the couple behind them and both were relieved when they at last sat down at the small round table in the big restaurant. Not far from them a string orchestra was resolutely doing its duty as a first aid to conversation—to cover it or to make it unnecessary. It was for assistance towards this latter end that the party at the round table blessed the music. Each was busy with thoughts that could not be communicated. And only Maurice's were clear-cut and distinct, for it was only Maurice who at that moment knew pre-

cisely what he wanted. The risks and disagreeables which hedged around what she wished for seemed to Mrs. Dareth to neutralise not merely its attainability but also its desirability. The ideas she encouraged were of some fortunate, unspecified chance which might remove the disagreeables. Sylvia, dizzy with the fumes of unaccustomed incense, knew only that she enjoyed them—that she liked to sit in this big restaurant with violets at her breast and the consciousness of being admired beating in her blood; while the doctor, characteristically enough, was too busy conjecturing the probable relations of the other three to think about himself at all.

Sylvia's satisfaction was presently increased by an apparently quite unimportant incident. A well-set-up, athletic-looking young man parted from some friends at a not far distant table; to leave the room he was obliged to pass by the place where Mrs. Dareth and her party were seated, and as he neared them, he hesitated. Feeling his glance, Mrs. Dareth looked up, with doubt which quickly changed into recognition. She smiled, and as the young man came towards her, held out her hand. exclaiming:

"Why, Mr. Haller! Where did you drop from? I didn't know you were in town. Miss Farnham, Mr. Maurice, Dr. Macneven, Mr. Haller."

The usual greetings over, Mrs. Dareth went on:

"Have you come to stay? I thought your people had decided not to leave Chicago just yet."

"Oh, they're not here. I only ran down for a little visit and I'm off again to-morrow night—worse luck."

His words were addressed to Mrs. Dareth, but it was on Sylvia that his eyes rested with frank approbation.

Sylvia realised this with a thrill of pleasure; Mrs. Dareth realised it, and didn't like it at all. That this child's fresh prettiness should prove more attractive to any man than her own cultivated charm irritated her. She gave Phil Haller no chance to talk to Sylvia, and a few minutes later he left them, having spoken scarcely a word to the young girl. Sylvia, however, was satisfied. He had evidently admired her, her thoughts were at the time almost entirely absorbed by Maurice, and she was too inexperienced to be aware of Mrs. Dareth's

pique—a pique destined to fasten the incident in that lady's mind, where it later bore fruit.

When they came out into the street night had fallen. Mrs. Dareth had decided beforehand what to do and say; if possible she always prepared herself for a situation well in advance.

"It's so late, I think we'd better divide up," she said. "Will you take this little girl home, doctor? It's not far out of your way. I don't like her to go about alone after dark." She patted Sylvia's hand affectionately. "And I know Mr. Maurice will see me into a 'bus."

Both men of course acquiesced in this arrangement, which suited them quite as well as it did Vida Dareth. Sylvia was again uncertain whether she was pleased or not.

The good nights were quickly said. Sylvia and the doctor turned down the Avenue towards her home in West Twenty-th Street, while Maurice and Mrs. Dareth started up-town, walking slowly until they were out of sight of the other two, when they signalled a hansom. Considering that Vida Dareth lived in East Sixty-th Street, near Madison Avenue, it took her a surprisingly long time to get there—more than an hour, in fact. The Park is a pleasant place through which to drive.

Alan Macneven was anything but a shy man; on many occasions he had been known to lay down the law with a good deal of emphasis, but now he somehow found himself suddenly anxious, even diffident. It was Sylvia who began the tête-à-tête by referring to her recent visit to the gallery.

"Vida—Mrs. Dareth says Mr. Maurice expected to get a lot of orders through exhibiting her portrait," she ended. "He hasn't, though; not one."

"That's rather hard on him," the doctor replied, wondering whether she had spoken of Maurice merely to make conversation or because her head was so full of him she could think of nothing else.

"Yes, isn't it? Vida says that unless you're awfully lucky you don't make much out of art."

That phrase jarred on the practical, hard-working man who was an idealist to the very core.

"I suppose there are compensations," he answered just a trifle brusquely.

"Oh, of course. Only isn't it a shame you should get so little for making something beautiful like a picture, and such a lot for manu-

facturing ugly things or getting people to lose their money in Wall Street?" This last speech too might have been prefaced "Vida says."

"You don't agree with the majority then, and accept the money standard of value?" He wanted to hear her give the reply he was almost sure she would make.

"Indeed, I don't." She had never thought about what he called the standard of value and was in truth not quite certain what he meant, but instinct dictated the answer.

He interpreted the indifference of her tone as signifying her belief that any other attitude was entirely out of the question. A pause followed as they made the long and difficult crossing at Twenty-third Street and turned westward.

"How much warmer it is!" Sylvia exclaimed as soon as they were safe upon the sidewalk. "I'm glad on Vida's account. She does suffer so from the cold."

The doctor smiled grimly.

"I'm glad it's warmer, too. But I don't imagine Mrs. Dareth's sufferings have been very severe." He hesitated, feeling that he had perhaps been a little rude, and added apologetic-

ally: "You see, I'm up against the real thing every day."

"Has it been so very bad this Winter—for the poor, I mean? With all people give—There's such a lot done in New York!" Vague recollections of newspaper headlines floated through Sylvia's brain.

"There's an enormous amount done," the doctor assented heartily. "If you were in touch with any of the work, though, you'd see how much more— Have you ever been to any of the institutions? or to a settlement and talked with the residents?"

"I don't know anything about them. What do they do, exactly?"

Dr. Macneven was on familiar ground now and he talked rapidly in terse, vivid phrases, urged on by Sylvia's interjected questions from one subject to another—from settlement work to the broader fields of social service. He did not realise how much of his own history he was telling; nor did he for a moment suspect how novel it all was to his hearer. She felt as though she were listening to an enthusiastic account of a new and extraordinary world—a world where the social position which in her own was mentioned with, so to speak, bated breath,

meant little or nothing, where wealth was a trust which might weigh heavily upon one's shoulders. Sylvia's emotions were easily aroused; and the unfamiliar has charms. She enjoyed her introduction to this new world and was proud of her appreciation.

Never a difficult person to convince—temporarily, at least—she was ready to fall in with everything the doctor said; almost ready to pledge herself to the labour, the life he pictured. In her ignorance she thought him unique; a hero, a modern Sir Galahad.

And if his enthusiasm swept her forward to excitement, it reacted upon himself; the flame he kindled warmed his own blood. His every nerve tingled with a rare exultation, he felt almost inspired. Thoughts, conceptions that had been dim or lain nebulous at the back of his mind took shape and outline, became radiantly distinct. It was an hour he never forgot—one of the half-dozen golden hours of his life.

In their absorption neither the man nor the girl saw a woman come out of a shop and pass them. It was only for a moment that Margaret Lane looked upon those two, but in that moment she had a clear vision, thanks to the powerful

electric lights, of Sylvia's sweet face, with its flushed cheeks, parted lips, and shining eyes lifted to the doctor. And he—never had it been given to her, his friend, to see that look turned upon herself!

Dr. Macneven was as yet unaware of what was happening to him; the woman who loved him realised it instantly.

She walked on slowly. She did not suffer at all; she only felt strangely numb. It seemed to her as though the flow of blood in her veins, the beating of her heart, the whole current of her eager life had suddenly ceased. Without thought or feeling she went steadily, mechanically along the well-known path, even stopping to buy a paper from the old woman who always served her. Then she began to be vaguely conscious of a wish for quiet. The clanging of car bells, the rumble and shriek of the elevated, the shrill street cries, all the multitudinous noises to which the New Yorker is so accustomed as scarcely to notice them irritated, presently half maddened her. Oh, for quiet, for quiet! The wish grew quickly into a longing so intense as to be painful.

This was her first distinct sensation—this longing for quiet. It impelled her to hasten

her steps. Faster and faster she walked, until she was almost running when she at last reached the house. Up the long flights of stairs she sped, never slackening her pace. She was doing her best to get away from something—was it the noise that pursued her, demon-like? Her hand shook so that it was difficult for her to insert her latch-key; it seemed hours before the door of her little apartment swung open. She closed it behind her and stood with her back against it, panting like a hunted thing.

Presently she sought and touched the button on the wall; the lights flashed up. And now all the familiar, well-beloved objects confronted her. She stared at them curiously. How was it possible that they should remain unchanged, while she——

She took off her hat and pressed her hands over her eyes. Was it in truth all a dream, a mere ugly nightmare? Impatiently she pushed the straying locks of hair back from her forehead. And her gaze wandered about the room, seeking, seeking for something she could never find. And from every corner and from every object, from desk and bookcase, from pictures and flowers, the ghosts of dead hopes stole forth to jeer at her. . . .

That which she had dreaded most was rapidly, surely coming to pass; she knew it now. The merciful numbness vanished. And she fell on her knees before the doctor's chair, her face buried in her outstretched arms.

CHAPTER SEVENTH

MARGARET LANE was a modern woman, one whose will and brain were quite as fully developed as her emotions; her instinct, an instinct born with her and strengthened by years of struggle and self-discipline, was not to turn her back upon that which was unpleasant nor to close her eyes and attempt to deny it, but to face it bravely and steadily. This thing which was happening was what she had always foreseen. She had honestly tried to prepare herself for its coming, even while hoping against hope that she might be spared. And though long immunity had had its weakening effect, with the result that at first she sank beneath the heavy weight of anguish so suddenly flung upon her, she soon rose again and stood upright on her feet.

To know more about Sylvia Farnham, her tastes, her disposition, and so knowing to be able to divine something of what the future might hold in store for Alan Macneven—this was now her great desire. And she went straight towards her goal with a quiet, single-

mindful directness which was characteristic. She was aware that Sylvia was constantly with Vida Dareth, and she herself had known the latter for some years, though never intimately. Moreover, she was acquainted with a good many of Mrs. Dareth's friends, who in fact made considerable fuss over her, partly because they liked her, partly because they thought her a celebrity, and complimented her profusely upon the books she despised, and they admired.

So it was easy for her to get herself invited to houses where she was likely to meet Sylvia Farnham, and she deliberately cultivated the young girl's acquaintance. Not because she had any hope of discovering the secret of her charm for Dr. Macneven; experience had taught her how incalculable is that mysterious attraction which makes the majority of marriages such puzzles to the disinterested. Sylvia was pretty, but Alan Macneven had met dozens of better-looking girls; she was young and frank and naïve, qualities not uncommon; she was, to use the expressive French phrase, *fraîche*; so were many others. Yet those others had left him indifferent, while Sylvia. . . .

Margaret strove with all the sincerity of her big, splendid nature to be just; she knew she

was jealous. And there were hours when she paced the floor of her lonely sitting-room, rebelling passionately against her lot. The stillness of the little apartment in which there was no living thing save herself, seemed to close upon her, to shut her in, to stifle her. And she would cry out aloud that it wasn't fair to deny her even the half-loaf with which she had forced herself to be content. Why should her life be always solitary, without a ray of that love which brightens the lot of so many, even of the poorest? Oh, she knew the tragedy of the world! She had learned not to look for happiness, as she had learned to help and comfort and sympathise, to feel a genuine affection for many of her fellow-beings. But the nearer, more intimate ties—they were so numerous, there was so much love in the world, why must she be refused the crumbs with which she had striven to satisfy her hunger?

And pain wrenched from her that cry which has gone echoing through the ages: "Let me be happy, just for a little while! I've tried to do right, I've worked hard, and now—— Oh, it's not fair that others should have so much and I nothing! I've never been really happy—not once in all my life."

She fought hard against these outbursts of bitterness and despair, knowing them to be worse than useless. Night after night she sat resolutely down beside her lamp with a book, determined to read and if possible to forget herself: and night after night some word or phrase, perhaps the mere creak of the stairs beside her door, would crumble the resolve into dust. And sometimes when the paroxysm had spent its force she would go to her desk and open it, tempted to try what the beloved work in which she had failed could do for her. But she successfully combated the longing to write; had she not made up her mind to waste no more time in useless endeavours? She did not realise that each victory was more difficult than the last, that the hour was fast approaching when the craving for self-expression would master her.

Meanwhile her life was to all appearances—and to the surprise of many of her usual associates—a gayer one than she had ever before led. She could not achieve her object of knowing Sylvia better and not become involved more or less with several other people; among them, Mrs. Dareth and Noel Maurice. For Maurice also, as a possible celebrity, was warmly wel-

comed by a society which seldom gets a chance at the real thing. There were teas and little dinners, bridge and dances and theatre-parties, for entertaining among the numberless different social sets of New York varies more in degree than in kind, and Mrs. Jones of Harlem does her best to follow the example given by Mrs. Greatwealth of Fifth Avenue.

At first Margaret paid small heed either to Maurice or to Vida Dareth; she saw only the external and cared to know nothing more. Then little by little that clear gaze of hers began, almost involuntarily, to plumb the depths beneath. And what she perceived led her to dismayed astonishment, nearly to a denial of the testimony of her own eyes.

They were little things; an inflection, a glance, a change of tone. Trifles of no importance in themselves, taken together they seemed charged with grim significance; it is comparatively easy to control speech, which is why its accessories are of such great consequence to those who would know something of the truths underlying human intercourse. But now Margaret, who had so well learned the value of these factors, declared over and over again that she must be mistaken. No woman so kindly,

so sensitive as Mrs. Dareth could possibly act thus. Feeling almost like a spy she deliberately tried to turn away her eyes. She had wanted only to know Sylvia Farnham a little better: Vida Dareth she was willing to accept pretty much at Vida's own estimate, regarding it as at worst but an exaggeration of the truth. And yet ignore it as she would, distrust had been born and like some corroding acid was eating its way through certain habits of thought, leaving them mere fragile shells that a breath might destroy.

So far as Sylvia was concerned, she did not care for the doctor—yet. Of this Margaret was quickly sure; and indeed it did not take her long to attain to a tolerably clear comprehension of the young girl's state of mind—to understand how she was drawn towards Maurice by his good looks, his youth, his gaiety, the promise he apparently held out of a brilliant future; towards Dr. Macneven by the—to her—novelty of his type, the elements of greatness that glowed faintly through his rugged exterior, and still more, as Margaret presently discovered, by the fact that he stood for a life richer, more worth while than any with which she had ever come in contact. All uncon-

sciously he had found and grasped the thread of idealism running through the girl's nature. Would it prove strong enough to bring and hold her to him, or would it snap at the first strain?

This was the riddle which tortured Margaret, the riddle to which she could find no answer. And sometimes her large, determined mouth twisted in a grim smile as she realised more keenly than ever the charm rose-bud lips can add to a phrase, the emphasis a sympathetic exclamation gains from a pair of dark-fringed, soft blue eyes. For as the weeks went by she came to know with perfect certainty that all Sylvia had to bestow on Alan Macneven was but a tithe of what she herself could give; only, her gifts were not wanted.

He came to see her less often now; and when he did both were conscious of the barrier, impalpable as mist, impassable as wrought steel, which had arisen between them. The mind of each was busy with thoughts that could not be revealed to the other, and the old, well-nigh absolutely free interchange of ideas and experiences was gone. The man occasionally tried to renew it; the woman, more clear-sighted, acknowledged that in all human probability it would never come again. And she told herself

she hoped it never would, for it was he who must pay its price, not she.

This was in her best moments; there were others, but upon those it is not necessary to dwell. She suffered; and no one is always just or always generous.

If Margaret saw much and the vision caused distrust to be born within her, Mrs. Dareth was by no means blind. She began to feel uneasy, and with uneasiness came that desire to justify herself which was never very far from her consciousness. She took out her avowed motives—some of them—dressed them in their finest raiment, and paraded them before Margaret; but she was provokingly uncertain what effect they produced.

“I’m afraid,” she sighed one evening when Maurice and she were dining together at the Sykes’ new house on Riverside Drive, “I’m afraid Margaret isn’t *quite* all I thought her.”

They had established themselves in what Mrs. Sykes called the “Moorish corner” of her drawing-room, a sort of canopied sofa with a general effect of pillows and spangles which gave one a rather poor opinion of Moorish taste. Conscious that they were much observed, Vida Dareth increased the sadness of her ex-

pression. What is the good of concealing a secret sorrow with smiles, unless people are aware of the sorrow's existence?

"How do you mean?" Maurice asked, not expecting or even hoping for a definite answer. He had grown accustomed to Mrs. Dareth's way of walking around a subject and throwing fresh word-veils over it at every step.

She smiled again, and stretching one bare white arm along the back of the sofa, pillowed her cheek upon it, looking up at him meanwhile from beneath half-opened, heavily lashed eyelids. In the overheated room the air was thick and pungent with the perfumes the women guests used rather too profusely. It was all a little garish, a little too strongly emphasised; there was too much warmth, too much perfumery, too much ornamentation—and too much abandon in Mrs. Dareth's pose, graceful though it was. Maurice bent slightly towards her; he was breathing rapidly.

Had anyone been so rash as to describe Vida Dareth's conduct to her in plain English, she would have been greatly shocked, declared herself cruelly misunderstood, and decided that her informant must possess a very evil mind.

"I wish," she said in the gentlest, most wist-

ful of tones, "I wish I could break myself of the habit of idealising people. Heaven knows I've suffered enough through it to have learned better!" Her glance strayed, as if involuntarily, to where her husband stood talking to their stout middle-aged hostess, the uncertainty of whose grammar was equalled only by the kindness of her heart.

There was a long pause; leaving her husband, Mrs. Dareth's eyes sought Maurice's . . . sought and held them. He grew a little pale; there were moments, moments that were steadily becoming more frequent, when he found their relation almost unendurable. But he believed that he could see a promise deepen and develop in her soft, lingering gaze.

That silence must be broken; he spoke at random. "Miss Lane seems to me a very decent sort—if she only wasn't so abominably homely."

"Ah, but I believed her so much more than that!—a fine sweet woman, and a true friend." Mrs. Dareth's gentle voice curved a trifle on the last two words. "I thought she cared, really cared for me. She made me think she did." It was the first time this idea had entered her mind, and she welcomed it effusively.

"She seems to have taken rather a fancy to Miss Farnham. You can't mean, though, that she's left *you* for *her*?" Maurice was both surprised and indignant.

Vida Dareth smiled; wearily, patiently, caressingly.

"If that were all," she said in a tone which matched her glance, "if that were all, I could bear it. It's only natural for people to turn from the sad to the happy. And no matter how hard one may try to hide one's heartache from the world, it's impossible not to let friends—or those whom one believes to be one's friends—have an occasional glimpse of it. And then—then they go."

"Not I!" Maurice whispered fervently.

"No, not you. But you're . . . different." The tenderness deepened in her voice and eyes.

She wore a filmy, rainbow-hued scarf which had slipped off her shoulders. One end lay over her arm in a way that enabled Maurice to take and hold her hand unobserved. He pressed the little fingers, and saw her bosom rise and fall with the quickened breath. An almost irresistible desire to kiss the soft round throat swept over him. Only the presence of the other guests enforced restraint.

Mrs. Dareth thoroughly enjoyed that moment.

Maurice's head was swimming; but he still remembered those others and for Vida's sake he managed to keep up the appearance of a mere idle conversation by saying somewhat shakily: "And Miss Farnham?"

She was half consciously annoyed; why couldn't he stay quiet and let her imagine——

"Sylvia is very sweet," she replied wistfully. "But then she's young and quite unsophisticated. I suppose her mind too will be poisoned before long—like Margaret's."

He scarcely heard what she said. Her fingers lightly returned his pressure; that thrill obliterated all else. And again he answered at random, not caring whether there were any sense in his words or not: "Is she like the rest?"

Vida Dareth turned slightly, with one of the too slow, too sinuous movements she so carefully cultivated. The fashions of that day left little to the imagination, and her gown was cut in the extreme of the prevailing mode. "Yes; I used to believe her kind and good—that she thought no evil . . ."

As her voice trailed into silence there came a

stir of general departure among the guests. She gave Maurice's hand a swift clasp which perfectly matched her glance of farewell, and was gliding across the polished floor to join the rest of the company when she met her husband's gaze. An instant she flinched. For in it there was an irony she could not understand, an irony which, despite her reason, her sense of her own hard-won security, chilled her with a queer, inexplicable dread.

Nevertheless, she had not only enjoyed herself, but restored that feeling of blamelessness without which she could not be content, and which Margaret's clear-eyed scrutiny had somehow disturbed.

So whole and sound was it that she even ventured to take it out and show it to Margaret herself. They met at the Fifty-ninth Street entrance to the Park a few days subsequent to Mrs. Sykes's dinner. Margaret had been for one of the long, brisk walks which were her favourite panacea for the blues, or for any symptom of that envious bitterness she dreaded more than anything else. We often hear and read about the "test of character" by success; yet is it in truth half so severe a one as that made by failure? To stand aside and

watch others win, yet keep the ability sincerely to applaud their triumphs, never trying to belittle them or to detract from them, never hinting or even thinking that they are due to luck or favouritism, never letting wounded pride, small jealousies, hurt ambition sour and destroy one's appreciation of others' work, others' victories—is this nothing? Margaret Lane had failed, both as a writer and as a woman. She knew the dangers of such failure and did not deem herself exempt.

Mrs. Dareth stopped her taxi-cab at the curb. “Oh, Margaret dear, do get in and come home to tea with me! I'm perfectly exhausted.”

“What have you been doing to get so tired?” Margaret asked, accepting the invitation and taking a seat in the cab. She was ready to welcome any diversion of thought.

“My dear, I've made seventeen calls! Thank heaven, nearly everybody was out!”

“Why call on them if you didn't want to see them?” inquired Margaret. “It seems such a waste of time.”

This heretical remark quite shocked Mrs. Dareth, in whose circle calling was still a part of the social order. “But, my dear Margaret, I had to.”

"Why did you have to?" Margaret pushed the point.

"Well——" Vida Dareth paused, perplexed. Then as she dismissed the cab and went up the high stoop of the brownstone house her husband refused to alter into an American basement, she added in the tone of one announcing an indisputable fact, "I had to because most of them were party calls. Goodness, how tired I am!"

"The trouble with you, Vida," Margaret said, drawing off her gloves and speaking in a half-jesting way which softened her words, "the trouble with you is that you haven't anything to do."

Mrs. Dareth had thrown herself into an easy chair, but this amazing statement caused her to sit up with a jerk. "Nothing to do! Why, Margaret, how can you say such a thing?"

"Because it's exactly what I mean. Nothing to do that's worth doing or that's any satisfaction to you after it's done."

The appearance of the tea-tray restored Mrs. Dareth's mental equilibrium.

"My dear, I'm busy from morning to night," she declared rebukingly.

"Busy, yes. But—— What are your plans for to-morrow, for instance?"

Vida Dareth considered a moment. "Well, my manicure comes in the morning, and then I'm going to Mrs. Hilton's for lunch and auction. I almost wish I wasn't—I ought to go to the dressmaker's and besides, they play for such awfully high stakes, I'll be a wreck by the time I get home. In the evening—let me think—oh, the Grays are taking me to see 'Tippety-Tip' at the Frivolity."

Margaret smiled. "You've proved my case yourself."

Mrs. Dareth considered a moment. "But what can you do with yourself if you don't go around like other people?" That ever-present desire for approbation was not unmixed with truth as she added: "I know I'm often bored to death. We're not rich enough for the really smart set—and anyway, they only do the same things on a more elaborate scale."

Margaret shook her head. "If I'm not very much mistaken, that's only half true. I've met a few of those women and know something about others. They've changed a good deal in the last dozen years. They're developing a social conscience—they *do* things. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Blind, the Big Sisters, the suffrage movement

—they've learned how to work, Vida, and that's what a great many of your class still need to be taught."

"I don't think that sort of interference and making yourself conspicuous is a bit ladylike," replied Mrs. Dareth in a tone of superiority. "I'm sure I don't want a vote—what earthly good would it do me? Besides, it's men's business to look after such things, and strong-minded women are always disagreeable and never know how to put on their clothes. Of course," she added hastily, "there are exceptions."

"You were born at least twenty years too late," Margaret answered lightly. "That's why you're so bored and——" She checked herself. She had been about to add "and discontented."

Mrs. Dareth bit her lip. "You're altogether wrong," she exclaimed sharply. "I only want to have a good time—why shouldn't I? I'm young and pretty now. After a while it will be too late. I want fun and excitement—yes, and admiration too! I don't want the work you talk about as though it were a godsend; I want to be amused." She clenched her little hands with an abrupt, feverish movement. Some

nerve, long tense, had snapped at Margaret's touch. "And I will have a good time—I will, I *will*!" Her pose was rigidly erect now, very unlike her usual graceful languor. "So long as my youth lasts I mean to enjoy myself. When I'm old and wrinkled and ugly——" She shivered, and was silent.

Margaret made no reply. That unexpected outburst had taught her much—had taught something, perhaps, to Vida Dareth. For the first time she had openly acknowledged the dread which hung like a dark cloud in the background of her mind—dread of the swift, inexorable passing of the years. What could age bring to her, save misery? When the wrinkles could no longer be avoided, when her figure had lost its lithe grace, her eyes faded and grown dim . . .

Sitting alone after Margaret had gone, she thought of the future with impotent rebellion. She must grow old—she, who so far had always contrived to escape from the unpleasant. Already the battle with middle-age had begun—the battle which sooner or later would end in inevitable defeat. And again she clenched her hands as though clutching something that was being torn from her grasp.

The present at least was hers; and her thoughts flew to Maurice with a new frightened craving for his companionship, for fresh assurance of his adoration. Yes, he adored her; though it was of course a perfectly respectful, distant worship—a sort of Dante and Beatrice affair. She had repeated this to herself so often she almost believed it. But on the far horizon of her conscious mind was joy that she could wield the power of sex, and an eager determination to make use of it while it was yet hers. For the darkness was creeping steadily, ruthlessly onward.

CHAPTER EIGHTH

MARGARET had not been far wrong in her analysis of Sylvia's mental state. What she had, however, failed to take into sufficient account was the young girl's very natural enjoyment of the situation, her sense that she was moving through a romantic drama in which hers was the heroine's part.

Sylvia felt quite sure that Maurice would eventually ask her to marry him; but of the extent of Dr. Macneven's admiration she was not at all certain. Consequently, with that perversity which is not merely feminine but also human, she was rather more interested in the doctor than in Maurice, and wished that they might meet more frequently. She would perhaps have done something to bring about this desired result had she not been very innocent, in the old-fashioned meaning of the word which makes it nearly synonymous with ignorance. For such innocence with its pervasive dread of the unknown defies the conventionalities only in popular fiction. She agreed enthusiastically with everything he said, no matter how vague

her notion of its import, and managed to convey the impression that she had lacked opportunity rather than intelligence or sympathy.

With each encounter he seemed to her more and more, as he had during that first long talk of theirs, a being from another world—a world whose ideas and standards were unlike any with which she had ever come in contact. And this unfamiliar world was influenced by a religion of which she caught occasional glimpses; a religion whose only creed was faith in God and Man, whose one commandment was service.

To her it was all strange still, and bewildering. Yet she was conscious that here was something better than any of her own somewhat materialistic dreams.

She understood that Alan Macneven was fighting disease, social injustice, death. Her limited imagination could form no picture of the details of the conflict, but she felt that his was a career which any heroine might proudly share. Her conception of warfare was principally a matter of flags and trumpets; dust, poor food, humdrum routine, and exhausting marches never entered into her mental vision.

And all the while she was growing more and more dissatisfied with the conditions of her own

life, more and more given to fits of petulance and ill-temper at home. The daily contrast of its small economies and deprivations with the comparative lavishness of Vida Dareth and Vida Dareth's friends, who were all at least moderately well off, made her consider her own lot a very hard one. Service, self-sacrifice had to do only with the flags and trumpets; they were something quite apart from the small commonplaces of every-day existence. So she told herself, but conscience now and then pricked denial, and the prickings irritated her.

"My hands might be pretty if I didn't have to do such an awful lot of dusting," she exclaimed one day in an injured tone, coming into the dining-room where her mother was busy setting the lunch table, it being the maid's "afternoon out."

Mrs. Farnham, a little woman with scanty grey hair and a deprecating manner, turned away to hide the sudden twitching of her lips. She was one of those American mothers who kneel to their children—a type which, happily, is fast becoming obsolete.

"I'm sorry, dearie," she replied in the hesitating way habitual to her. "I didn't think—

of course, you must keep your hands nice. And I can do the parlour just as well as not."

Sylvia had the grace to pause and feel uncomfortable. "Well, it's a shame either of us should be obliged to do servants' work."

Exactly why it was a shame she would have found it troublesome to specify.

Mrs. Farnham sighed. She was remembering a time during Sylvia's youth when for the child's sake she had done work much heavier than dusting—and not minded it in the least.

"You're not fit for that sort of thing, dearie, I know," she said; and added a little shyly: "I've always believed you were destined to be rich some day. You could fill any place." She surveyed her pretty daughter with tender pride.

"I certainly don't mean to stay poor if I can possibly help it," announced the girl emphatically, as she shut the silver drawer with a jerk.

Mrs. Farnham summoned her courage to say what had been in her thoughts for some time. "Then you mustn't fall in love with a poor man, dearie." She paused to bring in the cups, and presently went on: "This Mr. Maurice, now—has he any money?"

Sylvia accepted the implication. "No; but he has prospects."

Over the mother's face, worn with the long years of ceaseless struggle to make ends meet, marked by the lingering death of one hope after another, there came an expression tragic in its intimation of bitter knowledge.

"Your father," she said quietly, "had 'prospects' when I married him."

"Well, I don't want to marry Mr. Maurice," Sylvia declared. "And I can't help it if he——" She broke off with a laugh and a blush.

Mrs. Farnham was pleased but not surprised. What more natural than that Sylvia should be wooed? And confidence was very sweet to this humble little woman who felt that her only child was daily slipping further and further away from her. Nor could she guess then how soon the time was to come when her belief that Maurice was in love with Sylvia would prove a stumbling-block between her daughter and herself.

The immediate result of this brief conference was that Mrs. Farnham added the care of the parlour and Sylvia's room to her already long list of duties; she would have scrubbed the floors cheerfully could she thereby have made the girl better satisfied with her home. Ulti-

mately it influenced Sylvia when she made the choice which decided the entire course of her life.

She had said she did not intend to marry Maurice, but to her it seemed an unquestionable fact that she must and would finally marry someone, and she knew it to be the exceptional girl who cannot count her offers on the fingers of one hand. She was too young not to consider herself exceptional, but her opportunities, she felt, were unusually few. Wandering from Maurice, her thoughts went straight to Dr. Macneven.

“Alan”; she rather liked the name. He was always busy—he must have a very large practice. And so clever a man might become—well, almost anything! If he should specialise? Perhaps he did. She had a confused recollection of having heard that it is specialists who make the most money.

She paused at the corner of Thirty-fourth Street, waiting for the traffic signal. She was on her way to Vida Dareth’s, walking, not for exercise or pleasure, but because the ’bus fare is ten cents. How nice it would be to be able to call a hansom and drive up the Avenue! Some day, perhaps, if all went well, she—

"Good afternoon, Miss Farnham. Are you shopping, or only out for a walk?"

Sylvia started, turned, saw Dr. Macneven standing at her side, and blushed furiously. His appearance just then, fitting in as it did with her thoughts, wrecked her self-possession, and she would have shown herself mortifyingly dumb and embarrassed had not the traffic policemen unwittingly rescued her by blowing their whistles.

"Now look out!" exclaimed the doctor, piloting her across the street and wondering why his innocent question had so disconcerted her.

The moment's respite was enough to permit Sylvia to regain her lost composure. "I'm on my way to Mrs. Dareth's."

"So am I," returned the doctor. "Julius telephoned me he'd be home early this afternoon, so I'm going there to have a talk with him about our bill."

Sylvia looked puzzled; she associated the word "bill" only with unpaid debts, and she repeated doubtfully: "Your bill?"

"Yes, haven't you heard of it? We think we may be able to get it passed this session," Dr. Macneven explained.

"Nobody's told me a word about it."

Though still perplexed, Sylvia was beginning to see a gleam of light.

“Why, it’s a bill creating a minimum wage for women in certain industries. Poor souls, they need it!”

This was all Greek to Sylvia, so she exclaimed: “How interesting! I wonder why Vida’s never mentioned it?”

“I don’t believe she knows anything about it,” the doctor responded. “She doesn’t like to hear people discuss unpleasant facts, you know. Dareth himself hasn’t been mixed up in it long, but several of us—Brainerd, Cavanagh, Devlin Morris, Venham, Malling, and two or three more—have been fighting for years to get it through. Next Wednesday night we’re to have a big meeting—Robert Cavanagh’s financing it—and I want Dareth to persuade some of his political friends to come. A few of the unions are backing us up, but we’ll need every bit of help we can lay our hands on.”

Sylvia looked at him with increased respect. For several of the men whose names he had mentioned belonged to that social and financial aristocracy she constantly read about in the only section of the newspaper to which she ever gave much attention. She had a fleeting

glimpse of possibilities so brilliant they dazzled her. And she thanked her lucky stars that she had on her most becoming hat.

"Will it be a very large meeting?" she asked, clinging to the only portion of the subject she understood. For what a minimum wage might be she hadn't the least idea.

He chuckled gleefully; this bill was a long-cherished project of his, and he was full of hope and enthusiasm. "I think so. Mary Dean's to speak for the women themselves, Cavanagh for the consumer, Sydney Farrell for the manufacturer, and I'm going to say a few words on the medical side of the case."

"Who is Mary Dean?" asked Sylvia, privately very much bewildered.

"She used to be a factory worker. But she started and led a strike some time ago and did it so successfully that they made her an organizer. Now she's quite a personage. A splendid woman—pure grit clean through."

Sylvia fairly gasped. To admire a strike-leader . . .! Why, weren't such people all anarchists and dynamiters?

This time her amazement was obvious; it amused the doctor, even while its ingenuousness gave her an added charm, and he could not

resist the temptation to continue: "The fact is, I'm quite elated over this chance of speaking from the same platform with her."

Sylvia rushed for the opening. "Are you going to deliver a long speech?"

The naïveté of this brought another smile to his lips. How young she was—and how sweet! Could anything be more lovely than that curve of her pink cheek which the brown fur collar caressed? And those soft, perplexed blue eyes, in whose depths lay the unconscious promises of womanhood! A feeling strong and tender and poignant filled the doctor's heart and ran swift and warm through his veins. He could not look away from her; and he found it suddenly difficult to control his voice.

"About thirty minutes," he said a little too evenly. "I'll have to condense a good deal, of course."

"I wish I could hear it!" Sylvia exclaimed, only meaning to be agreeable and feeling quite sure that ladies didn't attend such affairs, whatever ex-factory girls might do.

"Well, why don't you come? Miss Lane's to be there, and you can sit with her. Afterwards I'll join you and take you both home," eagerly suggested the doctor, to whom this proposal,

so startling to Sylvia, was altogether commonplace.

"I'd like it very much, but won't there be an awful crowd?" she faltered.

"Oh no. Besides, we're going to reserve a few seats for specially invited guests, and I can get you one of those. I'll speak to Miss Lane this evening and ask her to look out for you."

Alan Macneven would hardly have been able, just then, to explain his insistence, though had he thought of it an hour or two later, he could have found a reason for it readily enough. But he was a man too absorbed in his work, as well as far too healthy-minded, to be much given to self-analysis. He knew he wanted Sylvia to attend that meeting; and he did not ask why.

She agreed, with a pleasant feeling of doing something rather adventurous, and they made the necessary arrangements as they turned eastward towards Mrs. Dareth's house.

"Are you coming to Vida's dinner on the sixteenth?" Sylvia inquired while they went up the stoop. "She's giving it for those Chicago people, you know."

That dinner loomed large on Sylvia's horizon. She was to have a new gown for it, which in itself was An Event.

"She's asked me. And I'm coming if I possibly can. But you know how it is—I'm never sure what I'll be able to do." He found himself hoping with surprising fervour that this time his plans might not be interfered with.

Sylvia, of course, was aware in a general way that a physician was liable to be called off at any moment, but hers had always been the patient's point of view. To be in danger of being prevented from going to a dinner-party! How perfectly horrid! She felt very sorry for the doctor.

"Is Mrs. Dareth at home, Jane?" she said pleasantly to the trim maid who opened the door.

"Yes'm. She's in her sittin'-room, I guess." The maid's tone was civil, but a little sulky. Miss Farnham did not customarily speak quite so pleasantly as she had on this occasion.

"And Mr. Dareth?" added the doctor.

"Mr. Dareth sent word, sir, that if you come you was to be asked please to wait a few minutes. Will I show you upstairs to the library, sir?" The change from civility to deference was as marked as Jane dared permit it to be.

"Oh, you needn't trouble, Jane; I'll take care

of Dr. Macneven," Sylvia interposed confidently.

"Very well, ma'am."

Jane vanished; Dr. Macneven slipped off his overcoat and followed Sylvia, who, greatly pleased at this chance to show how very much at home she was, ran lightly on ahead. The door of the sitting-room was not quite shut; Sylvia tapped gently, entering almost at the same moment with the doctor close behind her.

But they had taken only a few steps forward when both stopped short. Sylvia uttered neither sound nor cry. She stood silent, motionless. And she grew white to the very lips.

On her favourite sofa near the fire sat Mrs. Dareth and beside her, holding her two hands in his, was Noel Maurice. As they entered he murmured fervently words they did not catch. And he covered with kisses the hands she made no faintest attempt to draw away.

Urged by an instinctive desire to protect Sylvia, the doctor moved quickly in front of her. And at the sound Mrs. Dareth looked up. Maurice heard nothing.

"Sylvia!"

The exclamation broke sharply from Vida

Dareth's lips. Snatching back her hands she sprang to her feet, all her languid self-satisfaction gone for the moment. But although she had cried the girl's name it was upon the man that her gaze fastened.

Maurice too was on his feet now; and like Mrs. Dareth, he stared fixedly at the doctor. Some curious instinct made them both treat Sylvia as a negligible quantity.

Vida Dareth's exclamation was followed by a silence which weighed upon the room like a leaden pall. There was not a sound save the ticking of the French clock on the mantel. She caught herself counting the strokes; one, two; one, two. She wanted to think, to defend herself, to find some plausible explanation; she would have secretly despised any other woman for being unable to carry off gracefully a similar situation. She moistened her dry lips, striving to speak; she could only count silently, one, two; one, two.

And it was Sylvia who broke that intolerable stillness. Sylvia, who of them all had least at stake.

"The door—wasn't shut," she said.

Dr. Macneven put a compelling hand on her arm.

"Come away—come out of this house at once," he commanded.

An instant Sylvia wavered. Then a sob rose in her throat, forcing her to speech she never ceased to regret.

"Why did you lie to me?" she cried. "Why did you lie to me—both of you?"

Those broken phrases told the doctor much. His brain worked lightning-swift; he saw and grasped, not the whole truth but a goodly portion of it. He could not touch the woman; he strode over to the man.

"You cur!" he muttered grimly. "You filthy cur!"

And he struck Noel Maurice across the face with his open hand.

For a second Maurice staggered backward, breathless, cowed. His cheek bore a bright scarlet mark. Then with an inarticulate animal-like snarl of rage he sprang at his assailant.

But Mrs. Dareth caught his arm.

"Noel! The servants! For Heaven's sake . . ."

He yielded, not unwilling, perhaps, to be pacified. So at least the doctor read his expression.

"You know," said Dr. Macneven, "you know where you can always find me."

He looked steadily at the other man, waiting; undisturbed, the clock ticked on, one, two; one, two.

Furtively Maurice licked his dry lips, but he said nothing. And now the doctor turned to Sylvia.

"Miss Farnham . . . ?"

With a gesture not unlike that of a frightened child she slipped her hand through his arm, and they went together out of the room. Dr. Macneven closed the door behind them, as though shutting some unclean thing away out of sight. So, without another word, they left the house.

But they had gone only a very little way when the tears Sylvia had been trying to check broke forth. And she never quite knew how it was that she found herself in the corner of a taxicab, free to sob her heart out if she wished.

Her lacerated vanity ached and throbbed, and the shock had made her a trifle hysterical. She believed her pangs those of wounded love. Noel Maurice it was who had now become unattainable and therefore desirable. While she imagined that he was hers if she wanted him, she could regard him dispassionately. Now

he had been taken from her, and by Vida Dareth. . . .

By Vida Dareth! Sylvia was not clever or experienced enough to see the truth as the doctor had done. She only felt vaguely, resentfully, that she had been tricked and laughed at—treated as though she were a mere silly child. And now she was crying like one—she was so young that she was ashamed of her youth. They had lied, lied, lied to her! Maurice, whom she had thought a model of chivalry; Vida, to whom she had given such ardent admiration, who talked so beautifully about friendship!

Dr. Macneven, sitting there with averted eyes, judged the intensity of her feeling by his own; and so exaggerated it hugely. His helplessness made him wretched; what comfort could he who was nothing to her offer, that would not seem an insult? Yet her every muffled little sob tore his heart-strings.

CHAPTER NINTH

It had been simple enough for Dr. Macneven to walk straight out of Mrs. Dareth's house, but their relationship could not be terminated so easily. What excuse was he to make to Julius? Frankness was the very breath of life to Alan Macneven, and here he found himself involved in a situation where frankness was impossible. For however it might work out if treated as an academic question of ethics, he knew he could no more tell Dareth what he had seen than he could permit the affair to go on without some attempt at interference.

His first thoughts had all been for Sylvia and her probable disgust, humiliation, shattered illusions; Mrs. Dareth's conduct appeared to him only in its possible effect upon the girl. And he had learned what an important factor in his own life was her feeling for Maurice. Had her discovery of the double game the artist had been playing broken her heart or merely hurt her pride? That was the question which tormented Dr. Macneven, for he believed his future weal or woe hung upon the answer.

Even if she did not care for Maurice, what must it not have meant to her to have such a scene, with all its ugly implications, thrust upon her? Or was she, could she be blind to them, conscious only of an indefinite outrage to her maiden dignity? He tried to put himself in her place, and found the result bewildering.

It was inevitable that through his idealisation of Sylvia the doctor should see Maurice in even darker hues than righteously belonged to him. Her cry, "Why did you lie to me?" rang in his ears, accusing and condemning both the man and the woman. For like many another and wiser man, Alan Macneven was thrall to a pair of soft eyes in whose depths he fancied he could discern all the qualities of noblest womanhood. He knelt to a divinity he had himself created.

Sylvia's face and form were enshrined in his heart; he did not know that his imagination had endowed her with the mind and soul of another woman.

Meantime, the problem of his own future relations with Julius Dareth and Julius Dareth's wife clamoured for immediate solution. To telephone an excuse for his non-appearance on that eventful afternoon had been easy

enough; continually to refuse to come to Dareth's house would certainly end in Dareth's insisting on an explanation, and then there might and would be all sorts of complications. He was not a skilful liar, and he swore inwardly at what he termed "the whole infernal business."

But though this might give him a certain amount of mental relief it was not a guide to action. The thing might have been simpler had he believed Mrs. Dareth to be what is technically called "a guilty woman." His knowledge, however, at once of human nature and of her type, made him regard this as highly improbable. It was the very fact that she was safe in her varied treachery to Julius and Sylvia—treachery of word and spirit—which most disgusted him. And it seemed detestable hypocrisy even to think of meeting her in ordinary social intercourse with the memory between them of that moment when they stood silent, facing each other across the quiet room. . . .

Suddenly came an idea, like a ray of light flashing athwart the darkness. Margaret had of late been a good deal with Mrs. Dareth; Margaret might know something about the relative

positions of those three—anyway, it would be a comfort just to see and talk with her. It was nine o'clock one stormy evening when the doctor came to this decision, and a quarter of an hour had not elapsed before he entered the familiar room.

Margaret received him with her usual quiet welcome; one cannot through long years bravely face disappointment after disappointment without acquiring a fair amount of self-control. She motioned him to his customary chair and he sank gratefully into its comfortable hollows. In this lamp-lit, homelike room all things took on for him a more normal aspect. He could rest here, mentally as well as physically.

"Well, what have you been doing with yourself lately?" he asked as a way of opening the conversation and perhaps starting it upon the road he wanted it to follow.

"I've been frivolling," she replied, and added smilingly but not quite truthfully, "I thought if I went about a little I might find an idea for a new story. My brain's squeezed dry."

"I suppose the last is selling splendidly?"

It was with a pang that she realised the per-

functioneriness of that question. Not so would he have asked it only a few weeks ago.

But she responded quietly: "Oh yes. People seem to like it and all the while critics are as politely contemptuous as usual. They're perfectly right; the thing's trash, of course." She paused a moment and then went on in a tone rigorously kept casual: "You're doing some frivolling yourself! Vida tells me you're coming to her dinner on the sixteenth."

"I—don't know." Dr. Macneven hesitated; and plunged. "See here, Margaret. You're a clever woman; what do you think of Mrs. Dareth?"

Our friend Alan was no diplomatist.

She looked at him searchingly while nebulous doubts, half-formed suspicions swarmed into her mind. Only to gain time did she question: "You mean—seriously?"

"Yes." He met her eyes squarely. "Yes, very seriously."

But again her reply was an interrogation; if it acknowledged it also made reservations. "What have you seen, Alan?"

The desire to be frank was almost irresistible; old habit too tugged hard, yet still he fenced: "Enough to make me think there must be some-

thing—some sort of flirtation—between her and that”—his tone became bitter—“and that fellow Maurice.”

She knew that if this man with all his robust faith in human nature had been forced to suspicion the compelling cause must be strong indeed. She answered reluctantly: “I’ve thought so myself, once or twice.”

He caught swift hold on a barely perceptible inflection in her voice. “Then you never believed in his . . . attentions . . . to Miss Farnham?”

Urged on by habit and impulse, he did not divine whither his words were leading them. But the woman knew. And for a terrible instant temptation gripped and shook her. . . .

She forced a “No” through unsteady lips.

Then Dr. Macneven’s wrath surged forward over the barriers he had erected to check it. “The hound! I’d like to thrash him within an inch of his life! Did he never think what it might mean— Oh, he’s an attractive fellow, and he knows it well enough! How dared he act as if he wanted to make her care for him? Just think of the harm——”

He paused abruptly. And Margaret knew that without realising it he was questioning her.

She gave him one swift glance; and the hunger, the unconscious entreaty in his eyes were like acid poured upon her sore heart. He was asking her for hope—asking her what she thought of his chance of succeeding with another woman. And she who could read Sylvia's character so well knew how great a help such hope might be to him. Belief in his ultimate victory might half win his battle—and it was she who must place this weapon in his hand! She, whose dearest joy such triumph would annihilate. For she had no delusions. Alan might, and if he thought about it at all, probably did believe that their friendship would survive even his marriage; but she knew better. And the temptation which had shaken her before gripped her now with redoubled strength. Why should she sign her own death-warrant?

If Fate did not so often require us to respond to her demands on the instant, remorse would play a comparatively small part in our lives.

It seemed long, but it was really only a moment before Margaret spoke. And in that brief moment which was all that was allowed her, she had made the great decision.

"Fortunately, he didn't do any harm," she said slowly, staring at the empty grate with unseeing eyes. "Sylvia was flattered, of course, but"—the words came tonelessly from stiff, reluctant lips—"but she doesn't care for him."

It was done; whether for good or for evil, she had given him the weapon, the hope he craved; it was his now, past recall. She heard his long deep breath of relief; she did not look at him, but some sixth sense told her of the light that had come into his eyes. And she felt sick, and very cold.

"Sometimes," Alan Macneven said slowly and a little shyly, "sometimes it seems as though a girl like that—one so sweet and innocent, so—so flower-like—possesses a sort of instinct which warns her. You remember the old superstition about the hazel rod that could find hidden water?"

And Margaret understood; understood far more and far better than the doctor dreamed. Not for nothing had she learned through long years to adapt herself to his every mood, to read every shadow which crossed his face, every twitch of nostril or eyelid. She saw that he had identified pretty Sylvia with his ideal

woman; only she did not suspect how much she herself had done towards moulding that ideal, and so something of the irony of it all escaped even her.

But the doctor's last words must be replied to.

"Perhaps Miss Farnham felt Mr. Maurice's insincerity without realising it." There was no life in the rather banal phrase. Suddenly Margaret saw a way of at least momentary escape. "By the bye, Alan, are you going to Vida Dareth's dinner?"

Neither remembered that the question had already been asked; and answered.

"I don't know. The truth is, Margaret, I'm in a fix. I don't see my way clear at all. I can't meet Mrs. Dareth just casually after what happened, and if I don't go there, Julius will insist on explanations."

"Especially now, with this wage bill coming up." Margaret felt as though she were being permitted to breathe again. "You know he's gone in for it mainly to please you. He'd never have bothered with it if you hadn't urged him."

What it was that had happened she did not inquire. He had let the phrase slip

and she was more than willing to pass it over.

"I'm not so sure about that. Anyhow, he is in for it, and I've already disappointed him once. I hate making excuses!"

"You know you don't do it particularly well, either. Your very best friend couldn't call you a really fluent liar." She was forcing herself to smile and speak lightly. Every quivering nerve dreaded a recurrence of the former subject.

He laughed with the genuine amusement she had striven to feign. He had great faith in Margaret's discernment. She had lifted a weight from his heart, and he did not suspect that it was crushing her own.

"I'm sorry you've such a poor opinion of my talents," he said gaily. "Still, I don't think you're what anyone would term an expert prevaricator, yourself! Personally, I don't believe you could fool an infant in arms." Then, after a pause and with renewed seriousness: "It is something of an *impasse*, isn't it?"

"Of course, I'm pretty much in the dark." If only this blessed respite might last a little longer! She wondered with an odd detachment whether her voice and manner were anywhere

near as natural as she tried to make them. "I don't know just what the situation is."

"Nor I," he answered frankly. "I think I've worked out part of it, but I can't even make a guess at Julius's point of view." He stopped; for suddenly there came rushing through his mind phrases almost forgotten, phrases once uttered by Julius Dareth. "You're talking about something you don't understand—there are matters that can't be explained." How much did Dareth himself understand?

"Then we end," said Margaret, conscious that the irony of the words was audible only to her own ears, "just about where we began."

He assented with a shade of gloom which could not conceal the inner radiance. "Well, I'll have to trust to luck to clear the way. Though how I'm going to manage about Julius and that meeting—oh, I nearly forgot! Miss Farnham wants to come and I told her I'd send her a ticket for the seat next yours. Then when it's over I can take you both home. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind," she lied quietly.

So already and even in this work they had together planned and pushed forward, pretty Sylvia Farnham was to step in between them.

And he asked her "if she minded"! The short respite was over; once again the rack was being worked by that hand which would have let itself be burned to the bone rather than consciously give her the smallest pain.

"I hope it'll be a decent night!" He hesitated; then as the clock struck, rose to go. "Well, even if we haven't gotten anywhere," he added, taking her cold hand in his big warm clasp, "it's been a relief to talk the thing over with you, friend Margaret."

"I'm glad," she said simply. And she spoke the truth, although she knew whence the greater part of that relief had come, and the price at which it had been bought.

Dr. Macneven went whistling down the street, a fact of which he became suddenly and somewhat shamefacedly aware. All the weight of his long, hard-working years seemed to have been lifted from him; the blood sang in his veins, he felt young, strong, full of an almost tumultuous joy. For if Sylvia were indeed as Margaret had declared her to be, fancy-free, why then perhaps——! His imagination spun rose-coloured, glittering webs; he let it revel as it would. Sylvia his, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish—insensibly his thoughts

shaped themselves in the beautiful old phrases. And some day, please God, children; his and hers. Flower-faces to press against his own, little hands to slip confidently into his. . . .

His work, children, Sylvia! Life's best gifts; was it, could it be possible that they were to be so showered upon him? The thought made him feel very humble, very unworthy, this straightforward, strong-willed man.

But golden visions did nothing to clear the path directly in front of him, and its numerous difficulties were sharply recalled to his mind next day by a note from Dareth, which came while he was breakfasting. It merely asked him to appoint a time when the members of the committee might get together to discuss the final arrangements for the meeting, now only a few days off, yet all through the morning, during which patients of every kind came and went as usual, it made him conscious in the intervals between their visits of that blocked road lying before him. As one o'clock approached and with it the end of his office hours, he found himself looking forward to the coming escape from the confinement of his rooms

as though it meant escape from all his perplexities.

And it was then that the small coloured boy ushered in the very last of the waiting patients—Vida Dareth herself.

CHAPTER TENTH

SYLVIA's fancy for Noel Maurice had been a thing well-nigh rootless, which now that its existence had become undesirable she was able to destroy easily and almost painlessly, congratulating herself meanwhile upon her strength of character. So soon as her tears of mingled rage and shame were dried she leaped to the worst possible conclusion, gave the worst possible explanation for the deceit which had been practised upon her.

Yet her ideas were chaotic; neither by training nor temperament was she inclined towards clear-cut, definite reasoning. And she had been taught that upon certain subjects it was not "nice" to think or to speak straightforwardly. Like so many other girls even in this comparatively liberal age, she had been left to pick up what information she could from such novels and plays as chanced to come her way; the result was a jumble of truth and falsehood which was quite as bad as total ignorance . . . and perhaps worse. For now it wrapped the whole affair in a haze of mystery tinged by a lurid

sort of romance. And she was chagrined, rather than revolted or pitying.

It did not take her long to realise how many of her pleasures had depended upon Vida Dareth, and what it would mean to her to shut herself out of that lady's luxurious house. Yet how could she condone the injury done her? She must act with dignity or lower herself forever in the eyes of Dr. Macneven, Maurice, and Mrs. Dareth. "I wish they didn't know that I know!" was the thought which formed spontaneously in her mind—and recurred more than a few times.

Then there were her mother's timid questions to be considered. She could and did discourage their utterance by peevish replies; but she could not prevent wonderment and a mental debate of which she was disagreeably conscious. If only she had not declared so positively that Maurice was in love with her! To be obliged to confess how complete a fool those two had made of her—— They themselves did not know it, wherein lay a grain of comfort! And there was that long-anticipated dinner on the sixteenth, for which the adorable new gown, now hanging in her closet stuffed with tissue paper and wrapped in an old sheet, had been bought.

Would she ever have a chance to wear it, if she broke with Vida Dareth? And it was so becoming!

The afternoon preceding Dr. Macneven's talk with Margaret Lane was a dull grey one, punctuated with drizzling rain so that Sylvia could not even go out and find amusement by looking at the shop-windows. She did not know what to do with herself. All the days would be long now, she reflected bitterly. No more sudden invitations over the telephone, no more restaurant teas and luncheons, no more matinées and taxi-cabs; only the monotonous round that through Mrs. Dareth's intervention had been so pleasantly interrupted for a time. Sylvia, curled up in a big chair, stared sullenly at the rain. And boredom held her in its leaden grip.

Presently footsteps sounded along the hall and Mrs. Farnham entered. She glanced apologetically at Sylvia as she sat down and began to busy herself with a pile of undarned hose in her basket—a pile which seemed never to diminish, no matter how hard or how long she worked over it.

"What a disagreeable day!" she said, fumbling for an opening topic.

"Vile," Sylvia answered shortly. Her moth-

er's appearance and attempt to claim her attention had increased her irritability; a fact of which she was aware and a little bit ashamed.

A tactful woman would have remained silent; Mrs. Farnham waited a minute or two and then asked: "What stockings are you going to wear with your new dress, dearie? Have you any that'll do? You know I couldn't mend that ladder in your last pair of blue silk ones."

Sylvia frowned. "Oh yes; I think so."

It was the first time in her life that she had failed to take an interest in the clothes question and poor Mrs. Farnham felt as though the solid ground had suddenly given way under her feet. She made another effort to find a conversational foothold.

"I do hope that if Mr. Maurice sends you any flowers for the sixteenth, they'll be a kind that'll go with your dress," she remarked, removing the wooden egg from the toe of one of Sylvia's stockings and slipping it into another. "Violets, now, would be just the thing."

The girl bit her lip. Every word her mother spoke brought up the situation as it existed—or as she had believed it existed—before she opened that fatal door.

"You needn't bother," she replied brusquely.
"He won't send me any."

Mrs. Farnham dropped her work. "Sylvia! Do you mean that he's——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake do let me alone, mother! There's the bell. I suppose Annie's getting dressed, as usual."

"I'll go."

Mrs. Farnham adjusted her needle, rose, and gathered up her work, glad of the chance to escape from the room. She shut the door behind her, but Sylvia could hear the murmur of voices in the hall and listlessly decided that the caller must be either the laundry-boy or the man with the gas bill.

Then she caught her mother's words, high-pitched and nervous: "Sylvia's in the parlour. Will you go right in?"

There was an inaudible response, the door opened, and Mrs. Dareth walked quietly into the room.

Sylvia was too astonished to move or speak. She sat staring wide-eyed at her quondam friend; and her breath came short and hurriedly, as though she had been running.

Vida Dareth paused beside the centre table and stood motionless, graceful, and perfectly



turned-out in her trim black cloth suit, a velvet toque of the latest fashion crowning her soft hair. In one hand she carried a huge muff of grey fox fur, while the other, small and delicately gloved, rested lightly on the table. A single exquisite orchid was pinned on her fur stole; the sweet, sensuous perfume she affected came faintly to Sylvia's nostrils, bringing with it a host of recollections. And the young girl knew that she still admired and envied Vida Dareth.

Never quick-witted, she could find no words; it was Mrs. Dareth who spoke first.

"So that," she said slowly, in the tone of one deeply grieved, "so that was what you thought of me!"

An instinct old as humanity brought Sylvia to her feet.

"What did you expect me to think?" she demanded. With one dexterous sentence Vida Dareth had placed her on the defensive.

"Not—that. I supposed you cared for me. And I thought that even if you didn't understand——" She paused, and seemed trying to control her shaking voice. "I thought that even if you didn't understand," she repeated, "you'd trust me."

Anger leaped in Sylvia at this reproach. Her cheeks flamed and her voice was harsh.

"You lied to me. You lied and tricked me from the very beginning!" She fairly flung the words into the other woman's face.

"Sylvia!" It was a heart-stricken cry. "Oh, Sylvia, how can you say such a thing? It was bad enough at first—when you were hurt and angry—but now, after you've had time to think——!" She broke off there, with one of those appealing little gestures Sylvia had so frequently tried to copy.

"I can't see that time makes any difference," the girl replied stubbornly. "It doesn't alter the facts—the facts I saw with my own eyes."

Mrs. Dareth sighed. "And it hasn't even whispered to you that you might have misinterpreted the facts? Are you so anxious to think evil of me? I've always been kind to *you*."

There was just enough truth in her words to make them sting.

"No, it hasn't. The facts were far too plain." Defiance rang in Sylvia's tone. Without knowing exactly why, she had ignored all but the first question. And she felt as though she were being rapidly entangled in an invisible

net—that to take one step forward would mean to slip and stumble.

For an instant Vida Dareth's heavy white eyelids drooped wearily. Then she raised them and looked steadily, more reproachfully than ever at the girl.

"I supposed," she said sadly, "I supposed that if you had any doubts—and when I didn't hear from you, I decided, ah, how reluctantly! that you must have some—my mere coming would be enough to dispel them. Do you imagine for one moment that if I really were the vile, deceitful, intriguing woman you're so ready to think me, I'd dare come here and face you?"

Sylvia made no answer. Her opinion was unshaken, but she did not know how to uphold it.

"I see now," Mrs. Dareth went on slowly, as though nerving herself to a distasteful task, "I see now that I'll have to explain. I hoped it wouldn't be necessary. I'm so fond of you, and it does seem as though you ought to understand, but since you don't——" Another of those graceful, appealing little gestures, and she added: "Dear, won't you please try to understand?"

With every word she spoke she made Sylvia feel more completely and more inexplicably in the wrong, despite her unaltered conviction that she was in the right. She clutched at her departing dignity.

"Of course," she said stiffly, "I'm quite ready to listen to anything you may have to say. And if you *can* explain——"

That was a concession, and they both knew it. Five minutes earlier, Sylvia would have declared explanation entirely impossible.

"We each owe the other an apology," Vida Dareth said with a gentleness which was almost tender. "You, for so misjudging me; I, for making you the victim of my mistake. But your debt is the greater; you judged for yourself; I was deceived."

"By whom?" asked Sylvia, honestly puzzled.

"Can't you guess?" parried Mrs. Dareth in a tone half wondering, half reproachful.

"You mean—Mr. Maurice?" Sylvia flushed deeply as she pronounced the name both had so sedulously avoided.

"Yes. And yet—it wasn't altogether his fault. You mustn't blame him too bitterly. He was selfish; he thought only of getting what he wanted, never of the injury he might do you.

The injury"—Mrs. Dareth lowered her eyes and her voice was full of compassion—"I see he has done you."

Sylvia flushed again—with anger this time. The implication was intolerable. That they should dare to pity her, to think her jealous, a love-sick little fool!

"I don't care anything about Mr. Maurice," she exclaimed emphatically. "I never did. You might as well get rid of that idea at once."

"Ah, how brave you are!" cried Vida Dareth admiringly. "I did think you were fond of him, and the way you've acted since that—that terrible day"—she shuddered—"convinced me of it. The truth is, I fancied you were—jealous." She paused a moment to let that statement sink into Sylvia's mind. "You see, he misled me too. I imagined that in throwing you together I was doing you both a kindness. I was wrong, of course; I know it now. But I've always played with my cards on the table and it's difficult for me to suspect people. I'm punished . . . horribly punished." Her voice broke. "And yet . . . it wasn't my fault. Indeed, indeed it wasn't!" The yellow-flecked eyes were misty with tears.

Sylvia was silent. Within her two forces of

about equal strength struggled for mastery. Intuition told her positively that in declaring herself ignorant of Maurice's love for her Mrs. Dareth was lying. Not one word of her statement, her so-called explanation, did Sylvia believe; but she knew what a reconciliation with her would mean. And she remembered the pretty new gown hanging in her closet. And she felt that to touch Vida Dareth's hand in friendship was a compromise that would leave a stain on her very soul; for it was self-interest alone which counselled the act.

"Think what it means to me," Mrs. Dareth went on pleadingly, "to be deprived at once of my two dearest friends! I've always known you were more to me than I was to you, but I didn't mind so very much because I thought your feeling for me was genuine. And you've failed me, just when I needed you most!" She was doing her best to make it easy for Sylvia, whose inner conflict and the reasons for it she correctly divined. As there was no response she went on: "I cared for Noel Maurice too. Why not? I looked on him almost as a brother. I tried to help him; I trusted him absolutely. And now he—oh, I can hardly believe it! It's too terrible. . . ."

She put her muff to her eyes as though endeavouring to shut out some degrading sight. Tone and gesture alike were eloquent of wounded delicacy, of outraged confidence.

"Sit down," exclaimed Sylvia impulsively. And knew that she had made one more concession.

Mrs. Dareth sank gracefully into the nearest chair and applied her dainty handkerchief to her eyes.

"If you too disappoint me, if I can't rely on your love and trust," she continued presently, quite ignoring her former accusations, "I feel as though I could never lift up my head again. And yet I must give that dinner on the sixteenth and laugh and be cheerful—dearest Sylvia, I simply won't be able to do it if I have to face your chair, empty or with another girl in it!" Her outstretched hands were wonderfully expressive. "Oh, I know you're going to prove worthy of the love I've given you! You'll understand and forgive my mistake. If you only knew how I've suffered these last few days—how I've missed you and watched for you and hoped against hope that you'd come to me! I'm a very sad and very lonely woman, dear."

Again she paused, choked with emotion.

Every line of her exquisite, supple body drooped, endorsing her words.

But Sylvia made no reply. She wanted to yield, wanted to forgive. And she knew how despicable were the motives prompting her to forgiveness.

Vida Dareth had expected an easy victory. During all their intercourse, Sylvia had been as wax in her hands; was her influence to fail now, when it was most to her interest that it should prove potent? She rallied her forces for a final effort. And as usual her own words convinced herself if no other of her perfect sincerity.

"Sylvia!" She spoke quietly, lifting her strange glittering eyes to the girl's soft blue ones. "Sylvia, I swear to you that until that awful afternoon I believed it was you whom Noel Maurice loved!"

And Sylvia knew the oath perjury; knew it in every fibre of her being.

But she also knew that the story told her was plausible enough. She had no proof of its falsity, merely her own intuition. What right had she to rely on that, to believe the worst without absolute justification? It wasn't kind, it wasn't fair; she was being wicked, pharisaical. It was

her duty to think the best of everyone. And all the while that inner voice told her she was but trying to trick herself with high-sounding phrases so that she might comfortably do the easiest and pleasantest thing.

“Sylvia, dear, dear Sylvia, won’t you trust me?” Mrs. Dareth entreated pathetically.

Sylvia moistened her dry lips. “Yes,” she said.

It was Vida Dareth who had pleaded; yet in her heart Sylvia was well aware that at the end it was not Vida Dareth, but she herself who was humiliated.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH

Mrs. DARETH had gone to encounter Sylvia with some misgivings, but they were trifling compared to those which troubled her as she sat in Dr. Macneven's waiting-room. In the former case she had been aware of two reassuring facts; her own superior cleverness, and her consequent ability to play upon Sylvia's vanity and self-interest. Now she was quite without such supports. She had not the least idea what Dr. Macneven's special weaknesses might be; and she was intuitively certain that to appeal to his self-interest would simply mean coggling the dice upon the wrong side.

Of course she did not put all this plainly to herself. Naked truths were shocking things which must be properly bedizened before she admitted them into her conscious mind. She told herself that she had made a righteous and successful claim upon Sylvia's affection and fidelity, knowing all the while that she had done nothing of the kind. However, she had not been afraid of Sylvia, whom she understood and could checkmate; she was very much afraid of

the doctor, whom she did not understand at all. Only the greater terror lurking in the background forced her to try to outwit him.

When her turn came—she had been careful that it should be the last—she could feel little shivers of nervousness quivering along her spine, and her knees seemed unreliable. She wanted to turn and run; but she had courage of a kind, and what she made up her mind to do that she usually did.

Dr. Macneven was standing by his desk replacing some papers when she came in. He wheeled about, and their eyes met. For a moment they faced each other in a silence so tense it seemed a living, vibrating thing.

It was not her first visit to the doctor's consulting-room. Though an exceptionally healthy person, insignificant ailments had brought her there on various occasions, and there was nothing new to her in the tall bookcases, the big roller-topped desk, the glimpse through a half-open door into the immaculate whiteness of the laboratory beyond; but now it all seemed strange, implacable, representative of a certain rigorous, scientific honesty of thought and purpose, totally out of sympathy with her pretty,

sentimental pretences. Her nerves, strung taut, were unusually responsive to the atmosphere of her environment. She had meant to speak immediately; and she could find no words.

Dr. Macneven had at once recovered from his surprise. On his part, the silence was intentional. And after awhile he said in the pleasant tone he would have used to any ordinary patient:

“Good-morning, Mrs. Dareth. I hope you haven’t been waiting long. Won’t you sit down?”

She did not want to take her place in the indicated chair, where the light from a nearby window would fall upon her face; but she could not very well help herself, so she obeyed. Then the doctor resumed his own seat and leaned back, obviously waiting for her to speak.

It has been said that she was not without courage of a kind. All she had she summoned now.

“I suppose you’re rather surprised to see me here, doctor?”

“Well, it’s not the first time, you know,” he replied quietly.

She understood then that he would not help her to evasions; she must declare her errand.

"I mean . . . after what happened the other day."

She was glad she had brought her muff; within its kindly shelter she could twist her fingers together unobserved. Somehow, it was all proving even more difficult than she had expected.

The doctor readjusted some of the many papers that strewed his desk and placed a heavy weight upon them:

"You haven't come to me as to a physician, then?"

She was quick to take advantage of the opening, but she wondered whether it had been given her intentionally. She controlled her voice to its most musical cadence before she answered:

"No, as to a friend. A friend of mine—and of my husband."

It was a bold thing to say; Dr. Macneven realised that, and his estimate of her rose accordingly. He looked at her searchingly.

"You are speaking in his name?"

She winced, feeling as though she could no longer endure that steady scrutiny—not with the strong revealing light upon her face. She shifted her position a little, trying to avoid it,

and wondered whether it would not have been wiser to ask the doctor to come to her, where she could at least have arranged the stage setting to suit herself. But suppose he had refused—what then? The more direct had been for once the safer way. She stared down at her muff as she replied in a lower, less confident tone:

“Not in his name; but for his sake.”

Dr. Macneven hesitated, noting her pallor, the ungovernable twitching of the heavy white eyelids; and he said gently:

“Is there any need of our discussing this matter? You can surely rely on me not to hurt Julius—unnecessarily.”

It was both a promise and a warning. Part of what Vida Dareth wanted she had obtained, but not all. She looked up again, and said, a little too dramatically:

“I appeal to your sense of justice, Dr. Macneven! You’ve tried and condemned me already in your thoughts. That’s not fair! I’ve a right to be heard in my own defence.”

Unwittingly she had touched a chord that was quick to respond. We all have our pet vanities, and Alan Macneven was proud of his open-mindedness, his keen sense of equity.

"Certainly you have," he replied more warmly than he quite realised. "But you're jumping at conclusions, too."

His altered tone gave her a hint. She determined to force the issue, then and there.

"What do you mean by that, Dr. Macneven?" she demanded.

"Well——" He paused, and added with an apologetic little gesture; "I take it that I may speak plainly?"

"Of course. I detest subterfuges." She drew herself up proudly, and felt heroic.

"All right, then." He rested his clasped hands on the open desk and leant forward a little in an habitual attitude. "You seem to have an idea that I believe—well, the very worst of you."

"Don't you?" she challenged, throwing back her pretty head defiantly.

She was using tactics very different from those which had proved so successful with Sylvia, and using them, all things considered, rather skilfully.

"I'll tell you what I think," the doctor said deliberately, but with a certain crispness of enunciation that gave a tang to his speech—a tang Margaret Lane would have recognised at

once as a danger-signal. "I think you're one of those unfortunate women who have no imperative duties and are so stone blind they can't see that there are dozens all around them—don't realise they exist, simply because they're not enforced. So having nothing else to do, they spend all their time trying to amuse themselves; and there's nothing in the world so deadly dull as an everlasting hunt for amusement. Of course such women are bored, poor things. In heaven's name, what else can they expect? And they try to escape by acquiring some imaginary ailment or playing with imaginary emotions—get up a flirtation just to kill time. Now and then it goes further than they intend and there's a smash-up: generally there's a mere row—the sort of scene I fancy you've been through—and they feel virtuously indignant and get off pretty easily."

His glance was a question, half humorous, half pitying.

But her vanity was cut to the quick. He had pictured her as an idle, foolish woman, and she protested vigorously against a portrait so unlike her own conception of herself.

"You're misjudging me almost as much as I thought," she replied pathetically. "Don't

you believe in friendship between men and women?"

The doctor paused a moment; it was in his thought to tell her plainly that it was because of her and her like that such friendships were so difficult, so very nearly impossible. But he knew she would not understand. Then a change of ideas came.

"Platonics?" For the first time since she had come in his grey eyes twinkled. He felt sure now that his diagnosis had been correct. Mrs. Dareth might enjoy playing with fire: she would never immolate herself. His duty towards Julius had become comparatively simple. "Platonics? Why, yes—if there's no bar to eventual matrimony."

"But surely you must realise that a woman's husband often doesn't and can't give her all she craves; he's often unable to satisfy every need of her nature, no matter how good he may be." It seemed wise to throw a sop to Cerberus. "Why shouldn't she have friends then, —men friends? Isn't there a higher, more spiritual plane——" She broke off as she saw him smile again, and her heavy eyelids drooped.

"Pure selfishness, half the time; a wish to

play with fire no matter if someone else does get burned. That sounds brutal, doesn't it? Still, I gather"—he hesitated, and chose a more accurate phrase—"You tell me you've been trying an experiment in—er, platonics. Well, we've seen how it's—ended."

Every inflection, every sentence showed plainly enough that his opinion was unchanged. And in the last word he had repeated his warning.

Mrs. Dareth sighed heavily, unwilling to let the matter rest there.

"Perhaps you're right," she said sadly. Then lifting her eyes to his in a long appealing glance which made him chuckle inwardly, she went on: "I don't believe any man ever really understands women—particularly the modern, highly civilised women who are full of fine, deep feelings, delicate intuitions, spiritual cravings that the ordinary, comfortable existence can't satisfy. We've advanced beyond sex, beyond the mere bodily needs and desires. And so—we suffer. We're constantly shocked and disappointed and hurt in subtle ways that most people have no idea of." She sighed again, and felt saintly. Even unimpressible Dr. Macneven, she thought, could no longer fail

to perceive how beautiful and exceptional her character was. "We never, never get all we want."

"Is there any reason why you should?" asked the doctor quietly. He had decided that a little more plain speaking might do Mrs. Dareth good.

It was the first time that anyone had openly questioned her right to a special dispensation from all human ills—a right which she herself had always taken for granted. It was a moment before she could find breath to reply, and even to her own ears the answer sounded inadequate:

"Everybody tries to get what they want."

"Perfectly true. Only they very seldom succeed. And a good many find it difficult to satisfy even those 'mere bodily wants' you so despise—the need of food and shelter, for instance."

"Oh, if you're talking about the poor——! That's an altogether different matter, of course." Her shrug expressed her opinion of such irrelevance.

Dr. Macneven had picked up a pencil and was gently tapping the palm of his hand. Presently he laid it down again, leaned back in his

chair, put his finger-tips together, and spoke in a tone the more emphatic for its calmness. Mrs. Dareth needed plain language. Very well: she should have it, plain to the point of brutality. It might or might not do her good; at any rate, it was an experiment worth trying.

"If you had come to me as a patient, Mrs. Dareth," he said, "I'd tell you to go and find something to get honestly busy about, so you'd have some other interest in life besides yourself and your possible sensations. That's what you need—work! You have no children. Your servants practically run your house, and you spend all your time trying to amuse yourself. For mere decency's sake you ought to want some more respectable occupation. There are plenty of things fairly shrieking to be done. You'd not have to hunt long for a job if you'd only go and hustle round a bit. Get out into the world with your eyes open and see what it's really like. Then you'll have a chance to shed a lot of your delicate feelings and spiritual cravings and become a useful, self-respecting woman instead of a mere ennui-riddled parasite."

"Dr. Macneven!" For the moment Vida Dareth was too astonished to be angry.

"That," said the doctor with irritating deliberation, "is what I'd tell you if you'd come to me here as a patient. Since you haven't, of course I wouldn't dream of saying anything of the kind." The twinkle had returned to his eyes although his face was perfectly sober.

Mrs. Dareth choked back her wrath, remembering that she could not afford to quarrel with him just now.

"Ah well," she answered with a somewhat pinched smile, "we all know that you have very radical ideas! But I hope they're not going to prevent you from coming to my dinner on the sixteenth."

So it was as he had thought. She too dreaded the probable questions—dreaded them more, perhaps, than she did any overt act on his part. And he replied unhesitatingly:

"I'm afraid they will."

She bit her lip; inside the enormous, sheltering muff her hands were clinched. But she spoke smilingly, the cooing note again in her voice:

"Oh, doctor! After I've explained and told you everything!"

His quiet reply was galling, for it showed

how completely her attempt to bend him to her purpose had failed.

"Perhaps. But Mr. Maurice has explained—nothing."

With a flourish she tossed her trump card on the table:

"Sylvia is coming."

She had at least succeeded in surprising him into ignoring her evasion of his last remark.

"Miss Farnham!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Yes. I saw her yesterday and—our friendship is unbroken." Even as she spoke, something in his expression told her that she had at last found his vulnerable spot. And she thrust at it, swift and hard. "She will be terribly disappointed if you don't come."

"Miss Farnham expects me to be there?" A great deal of meaning was compressed into the one brief sentence. His keen glance strove to pierce through those yellow-flecked eyes to the truth.

Vida Dareth looked straight at him. This was no time for quibbling. And perhaps she really forgot that during their momentous interview neither Sylvia nor herself had uttered his name.

"Yes," she said in a tone that both emphasised and expanded.

There was a long pause while the doctor held a rapid debate with himself. However much he might detest the very thought of that dinner, if to go were to do Sylvia a service, help her to save her pride . . . ?

"Very well, I'll come," he said almost harshly.

Mrs. Dareth rose. She had prevailed, and she was quite willing to overlook the methods by which she had won this second time.

"Good-bye, then, until the sixteenth. I won't bother you any more . . . I know you're busy."

What dim sense of shame was it that made her keep her hands within her muff?

She was very tired; so soon as she reached her own room she flung herself on the couch and lay there with closed eyes. She had strained every nerve in her attempt at self-exculpation, and yet success had not elated her. From Sylvia she was henceforth safe. So far, so good. But was she safe from the doctor—or from herself? The warning he had given her, her own instinct repeated; she must break with Noel Maurice.

Gradually, if possible, so as to escape comment; but break with him she must.

And afterwards? When the excitement of his leashed passion had gone out of her life what was to take its place? She felt like a morphomaniac about to be deprived of the beloved drug. The stimulus, the sense of living intensely which he had given her lost, what interest would she have left? Work? Pah! What had she to do with work! The days and weeks and months stretching before her seemed dreary, utterly devoid of colour or expectancy. How she would miss him!

Suddenly one of the phrases the doctor had used leaped into her mind, filling her with a kind of angry terror. Was it possible that she herself was to be scorched by the flame she had so deliberately kindled?

CHAPTER TWELFTH

MORAL issues were something with which Sylvia Farnham had never felt herself to be particularly concerned; she had always taken it for granted that she never would or could do anything really, seriously wrong. And according to the formulæ which she accepted without any thought of questioning their validity, she was now behaving in a proper, even admirable manner. To forgive was divine. But undisciplined as her habits of thought were she knew perfectly well that she had "forgiven" Vida Dareth merely for her own personal advantage, and would be glad of any injury which might befall that too charming and astute lady. She was in fact simply and entirely jealous. While she fancied she could have Noel Maurice by lifting her finger, she had not wanted him; but not to be able to have him was a grievance, and that Vida Dareth should dare to think—and to hint!—that she did want and had wanted him all the time, was enraging. She ached for a chance to display her indifference.

Of course the best and indeed the only way

to accomplish this would be to marry someone else, but that was a good deal easier said than done. And she had lost some of her belief in her power to fascinate the more or less unsusceptible male. She had been so sure of Maurice! She chafed under the sense of an inferiority she could not attribute solely to ill-luck . . . an inferiority which dependence made doubly bitter.

An uneventful day during which she had roamed about with nothing to do, had fastened this discontented mood upon her when the evening appointed for the mass-meeting came. She took no interest whatever in either the meeting or its object, but anything was better than staying stupidly at home. Margaret Lane, already in her place, welcomed her smilingly and her response was very cordial; she always felt so pleasantly superior to Margaret, whom no one could possibly think pretty.

When she arrived the great hall was already well filled, and even the rows of chairs on the platform were rapidly being occupied. Though it was all new to her, she had not sufficient imagination to find it interesting, to grasp any of its significance, or even to see the curious contrasts about her. For all sorts and kinds

of people were there; labour-leaders and philanthropists, settlement-workers, and sensation-seekers, Socialists of the more practical type, rich men and society women driven by the invasion into their souls of the new social conscience to play an active part in the great humanitarian movements which will help to make the present century one to be respected throughout the ages. There were eager faces, hopeful faces, resigned faces; here and there one with the tense, drawn look of the fanatic. Middle-aged men, bent and worn, with hard, labour-calloused hands, overwrought women from various trades-unions, sat side by side with enthusiastic girls and boys just out of college; politicians hunting possible votes rubbed elbows with the merely curious on the one hand and energetic modern saints on the other. But perhaps the note of youth was the one most clearly struck in that heterogeneous gathering; or rather, of youth's great quality which sometimes lasts all through a long life—the ability to look forward.

Margaret knew a good many of the people on the platform, some only by sight, others personally, and she tried to entertain her companion by telling her who they were; but as

even their names were strange to the younger girl, she presently gave over the attempt. The hall was crowded now. Several bored-looking reporters took their places at the press-table; only the speakers' chairs were empty. Sylvia smothered a yawn.

Came a sudden burst of applause; a woman and four men had emerged from a little door at the back and were slowly making their way to the front of the platform; last of these walked the doctor. The chairman of the evening, a sturdy-looking young man with a clear-cut, decisive method of speaking, presently rose to his feet. Margaret whispered that he was Devlin Morris, a lawyer and the member of the Legislature who was to introduce the bill. Sylvia wondered what that meant. He said a very few words about the business of the meeting and then presented the first speaker, Mr. Farrell. This was a stout but energetic gentleman with a prosperous, authoritative air, who talked about efficiency, the cost of production and various other matters all equally incomprehensible to Sylvia, though the audience seemed to find them interesting, and applauded him warmly when he sat down.

Next came Robert Cavanagh, and to him Syl-

via paid more attention; for he was a millionaire known to be on friendly terms with several crowned heads. That he had claims to distinction which enabled him to hold this audience and command its respect despite the above-mentioned drawbacks, she was quite unaware. But she felt the charm of his magnetic personality, though his talk about the duties of the consumer and individual responsibility went nearly as far over her head as did the brief phrases with which he refuted the already raised objection that the bill was "unconstitutional." He was interrupted more than once, but the interruptions were all good-natured, even those of an extraordinarily tall, extraordinarily lank individual who insisted that without the Single Tax the minimum wage would prove a delusion and a snare, and was silenced with difficulty.

These two preliminary speakers, both of necessity dealing with statistics and generalities, had interested the audience but not stirred its emotions. Now, however, there was a rustling, expectant movement all through the hall. A small, thin woman, neatly though shabbily dressed in a black skirt and white shirtwaist, advanced to the front of the platform. Her

face was pale and deeply lined, her features nondescript; but her clear, steady eyes were alight with a sincere purpose. She began to speak at once in a low, penetrating, and rather musical voice.

“These gentlemen,” she said, “have told you what our bill is going to mean to the producer and consumer; now I want to tell you something about what it is going to mean to the worker.”

Sylvia presently found herself leaning forward with the rest; all that had previously been said was to her both new and unintelligible; that which this quiet little woman was saying was also new to her, but it was terribly easy to understand. No more generalities, but concrete cases related with an appalling simplicity; the stories of girls who had struggled and been defeated and died—or worse. To hear that ten thousand women were earning less than five dollars a week had meant little to Sylvia; the life-history of one of these women was something she could at least partly comprehend: hunger was vague; to live for a week on dry bread and tea was definite. She had never thought to ask what became of the sales-girl when she left the shop, nor how many

of the things bought were made; now she was told.

To most of the people in the hall there was nothing startling or unfamiliar in Mary Dean's speech; many of them could have corroborated every word of it from personal experience. But for Sylvia it opened several closed doors, and what she saw beyond aroused unaccustomed sensations—a sort of impersonal wrath, a desire “to do something” never felt before. She did not know that Mary Dean was renowned for her ability to move even an apathetic audience, and for the moment she was shaken out of her usual absorption in her own affairs. As she joined heartily in the applause the question: “What ought *I* to do?” entered her mind, and for the first time in her life.

Before her interest had had chance to cool Dr. Macneven arose; and the greeting he received astonished her. Even Mary Dean herself had not been so warmly welcomed. They were hailing him, had she but known it, as one of the leaders in the great twentieth-century crusade, thanking him for his long struggle against odds well-nigh overwhelming, for his determination, his grim tenacity and invincible hopefulness in the days when few approved and

many ridiculed him as unpractical and visionary. Nor was this all. For scattered about in the throng were those held to him by a more personal tie; members of the Nurses' Settlement, who had fought death with him, side by side; the heads of a famous refuge for women, who had found in him an unfailing source of help; factory inspectors, trying to do their duty in spite of official discouragement, who had come to him for aid which was never refused; individuals, men and women alike to whom in some dark hour of their lives he had extended a strong and friendly hand—they one and all did their very utmost to acclaim him now. Their enthusiasm was contagious; the groups surrounding them caught something of its fire. . . .

Sylvia wondered whether any appreciable number of this applauding crowd knew her to be his guest. She sat very erect, feeling that she was a distinguished person. Memories of their talk on the afternoon when they had gone together to Mrs. Dareth's, memories which the subsequent events had blotted out, rose to the surface once more.

And Margaret Lane, who had advised and hoped and worked with him so long, gave her a swift glance, reading her thoughts as easily as

though they had been printed. Never had Sylvia looked prettier; with her head held high, her cheeks flushed to the deepest and softest of pink, her eyes shining with triumph, she seemed all sympathy, all enthusiasm. And Margaret Lane knew she cared only for the applause; not for the purpose or for the man that had evoked it.

Dr. Macneven raised his hand in a gesture asking silence. Presently the tumult ceased and he began to speak. He was no great orator, but he had a strong, resonant voice and that power which springs from the union of intense earnestness with a forcible personality. In a few rapid words he summed up the arguments of the other speakers, and then went on:

“But there is one more aspect in which this question may be regarded. You have heard the manufacturers’ point of view, the consumers’, the workers’. I would speak now for the race, for the generation which is to come. And I say that we who are living to-day must decide whether that coming generation is to bless or to curse its birth. Do we mean to thrust upon it a heritage of exhaustion and disease? We want men and women to be healthy and decent? Then we must give them a fair chance! We

prate about the fallen woman, we establish our reformatories and our rescue homes—good things, splendid things, every one of them, as conditions are now. But we must and will change the conditions! There isn't a heroine in history or fiction finer than some of these working-girls who, in spite of poverty and temptations we can't even realise, keep their virtue intact. We won't give them a voice in the making of the laws under which they have to live and labour. We take it upon ourselves, we men, to regulate these things for them. Shame upon us if we don't do our very best!"

The great heart of the man, his absolute sincerity, the magnificent faith in humanity which lay at the core alike of his soul and of his speech, thrilled an audience already aroused and sympathetic. As he paused, something resembling a long-drawn sigh came from the listening multitude.

Then with a change of tone he uttered plain truths of hideous penalties entailed upon children and upon children's children. Only for a very few years has it been possible for anyone, man or woman, to talk as he did at that moment. But the cowardice and hypocrisy that in refusing to acknowledge encouraged the

spread of evil are rapidly disappearing, thanks in large measure to the courageous work of such people as Alan Macneven, M.D.

However, he did not linger long upon this sombre note; and soon his voice rang forth trumpet-like as he appealed to his auditors to help on the good cause. Let each and every one lend a hand—give personal service, if possible, in this or in some other part of the battle for social justice.

“We want you, every one of you; you yourselves, not merely your money! We’re going to see this thing through. We may be beaten at first, but in the end we’ll win. Help us to win quickly!”

He wasn’t an eloquent man. His plea was commonplace, perhaps, but behind it was the inestimable force of a splendid personality. Few among that audience but felt it as addressed straight to themselves. And so it became a very bugle-summons to charge in God’s name, for the right! and they answered the call, cheering, waving hats and handkerchiefs, striving to assure this man whom so many of them knew and loved that they were with him, heart and soul.

Margaret Lane’s thin lips were pressed to-

gether and her face was very pale. But her heart sang for joy. He was receiving his due reward at last! Here to-night he stood acclaimed, hero and leader. She told herself that she was contented to step aside now and let him pass on, victorious. She had helped him once.

Sylvia hoped he had distinguished her fluttering handkerchief from among the many. She was impatient for the moment when he would descend from the platform and come to her. She wanted to congratulate him—and she very much wanted everyone to see her doing it. She would tell him she was ready to enlist in what he had called “the twentieth-century crusade”; of course he must admire such generosity and spirit. If it had been possible just then for him to ask her to marry him, she would have assented, proudly and joyfully.

But many questions followed, and when at last the audience began to leave the hall, he was surrounded by his coworkers. Sylvia saw Mary Dean exchanging a warm handshake with him, and was glad to remember that however brilliant this ex-factory girl might be, she was undeniably plain and badly dressed. Not so the slender, golden-haired young woman who

had left her seat to join Robert Cavanagh and was now talking with him and with the doctor. Sylvia felt suddenly envious, not only of her beauty but of her poise and probable knowledge. Never mind! She would soon become known and admired, herself, by all these people. Just what she was going to do she hadn't the least idea, but it was to be something glorious in the sight of all men.

When Dr. Macneven was at last free and came to look for her, she lifted glowing eyes to his.

"Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful!" she cried in a vibrating half whisper. "I can't thank you enough for asking me to come. And your speech . . .!"

She broke off there with a quick intake of breath; but the way she gave him her hand was eloquent.

He grasped and held it tightly, unable to utter a word. The tribute received that night would have touched a character far less sensitive than the one the doctor concealed under a somewhat brusque exterior. His every nerve was tingling, strung to concert-pitch by his own intensity of feeling as well as by the emotions he had aroused. The years of struggle and

disappointment were forgotten, or remembered only because they had prepared the way for this hour when all things high and fine seemed possible of attainment. He had cried aloud; and the answering promise had thundered back at him! And now Sylvia's eyes, radiant with a new and beautiful light, gave hope of nearer, sweeter joy. She was one with him—the causes for which he was ready, if need be, to give his life-blood, appealed to her too. With this beloved woman in his arms his strength would be doubled. That it should be given to him, so much older and graver, scarred by so many hard-fought battles, to guard and cherish her! Oh, thank God, thank God!

Something of what he felt his look revealed. And Margaret Lane saw, and understood, and knew that he had forgotten her entirely.

"I think," he replied at last, "I really think we may be able to get something done."

He hardly knew what he said, for heart and brain were throbbing fast, and all the room seemed aglow with light.

They started to make their way out of the hall, but as they were stopped every half-minute by someone who wanted to shake hands with the doctor, their progress was necessarily

very slow. However, they presently emerged into the crisp, starlit night, and stood awhile on the corner waiting for a car. All down the line of Broadway lights flashed from theatre and restaurant; electric signs high above them sprang into view, changed, vanished, and reappeared with dizzying rapidity. Automobiles of every kind rushed by as though no such thing as a speed law had ever been heard of. The very air seemed redolent of haste; with every gust it bade one hurry, hurry to snatch pleasure from the flying hours. Sylvia felt as though she were being upborne on the crest of a mighty wave, swept blindly onward by forces of whose origin and purposes she was ignorant; she was bewildered and a little frightened under her excitement and exaltation.

When the car finally came she got into it mechanically. It seemed strange to her, this intrusion of the commonplaces of that ordinary, every-day life which during a few hours had been so remote. The realities to which she was accustomed ground harshly against those realities which to her were romance.

The car was crowded and the doctor obliged to stand, so they were all three silent until they alighted at Margaret's corner. Then she—

brave soul!—took hold of the situation and began to talk about the meeting, the people who had and who had not been there, the influences that would or might help the bill, the influences sure to be arrayed against it. And all the while she was acutely conscious of the inward turmoil of the two who walked beside her. For the moment she had reached a degree of nervous sensibility which made her feel that she had become clairvoyant and could follow their unspoken thoughts more easily than if they had been uttered aloud. But in those thoughts she had no place.

Why were they walking so slowly? Would she never reach the shelter of her room?

When at last she found herself alone behind her closed door she threw off hat and coat and began to pace back and forth, back and forth. . . .

But she could not escape from the pain that tore and wrenched and burned.

And for her there was no relief in tears; the hard sobs racked and exhausted her; that was all. She had honestly tried to prepare herself for the destiny she had foreseen; yet now beneath its blows her armour was smashed like an eggshell. She had been able to dominate the

imaginary evil; face to face with the real, she felt feeble and helpless indeed.

Helpless? No, not quite. Pride and hard-won self-control had enabled her to talk and smile that evening. Oh, she could have shrieked aloud in her anguish while cheerfully discussing the chances of the bill! And if she had, would he have cared? He had only felt her in the way, so far as he was aware of her at all!

The very keystone of her life had been snatched away; it lay about her now, a mere shapeless ruin. But she was not of those who lie prone and weeping amid such wreckage. Her instinct was to arise, and at least strive to rebuild; she did not regard herself, even in her most desolate moments, as one singled out for misfortune. Life was a battle from which few if any escaped unwounded; self-pity and wailing were the coward's part: to endure the inevitable pain without flinching, realising that each pang had its value and its meaning was to be, not praiseworthy, but only not contemptible.

She had paced the room blindly; now she found herself standing before her desk. And suddenly in this, her hour of agony, the longing chained down for so many months arose and

burst its bonds, proclaiming its rights, crying out that in self-expression she would find relief. An instant she stood, staring straight before her with the wide-open, unseeing gaze of a sleep-walker, while that power which had at last come to maturity within her soul ordered, demanded that it be set free.

Then she slipped into her chair and took up the waiting pencil.

After they left Margaret the doctor and Sylvia walked on together in silence. He dared not trust himself to speak; for he had partly divined her exalted mood, and he felt that to say anything of what was in his heart at this moment when she was so disturbed both mentally and emotionally would be to use an unfair advantage. This impression she soon unwittingly confirmed.

"I want to do something—to help," she said slowly, finding it difficult to put these unfamiliar ideas into words. "You said to-night that we ought each to do our part. But I'm so ignorant I don't know how or where to begin."

The light from a street-lamp illumined the sweet, upturned face. Her cheeks were flushed and there was a new lustre in her lovely eyes—

perhaps because she felt that she was doing something exceptional and praiseworthy. From beneath the dark blue velvet toque little tendrils of soft hair escaped, aided by the breeze, to curl over her forehead and about her pretty ears. The doctor's resolution was proving an exceedingly difficult one to keep.

He hesitated, as though seeking an answer to her question; really in order to renew his grip on himself. At last he said in a voice whose very tonelessness would have betrayed to a sensitive listener the suppression of some strong feeling:

"I don't quite know how to advise you. Perhaps the best thing would be for you to go with me some day to the Open House Settlement—I'll introduce you to the head worker, Miss Mannerton, and she'll find plenty for you to do."

He could have given "plenty to do" himself, to anyone else; a fine sense of honour forbade him to allow this impulse of hers to further, however slightly, his own private and personal ends.

She was a little disappointed by his quiet reception of her announcement; besides, she had expected to become his coworker, not that of

an unknown and probably disagreeable Miss Mannerton. And all the while she was aware of some strange disturbing force in him which somehow communicated itself to her and sent delightful little shivers of excitement running like electricity over her nerves. She thrilled to a sense of romance and adventure of which she had never even dreamed.

"Where is the settlement?" she asked after a pause, stealing a shy glance at him, and remembering with wonderment that at their first meeting she had thought him negligible.

He caught the glance and his head swam. They were turning down the side-street towards her home, and he was both sorry and glad. One more such look from those blue eyes, and his self-control would vanish like snow beneath an August sun. He steadied his voice carefully before he replied:

"It's over near Second Avenue, on —th Street. Could you go with me Friday afternoon? That's the only free time I'll have for quite a while."

They were in the hallway now, and she rang for the elevator before she said:

"Yes; Friday'll suit me perfectly."

"Then I'll come for you at three o'clock."

204 A WOMAN OF FEELING

“I’ll be ready. Good night, and thank you.”

An all-too-brief handclasp, and she was borne upward, out of his sight. He tramped homeward through the empty street with joy singing in his heart.

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH

It was the evening of Mrs. Dareth's long-awaited dinner-party, and Sylvia stood before the cheval-glass in the dressing-room, smiling approval at her own reflection. That dainty blue gown whose presence in her closet had so strongly influenced her was certainly most becoming; and the delicate blue and silver butterfly perched among her curls—a gift received that morning from Vida Dareth—gave just the needed, finishing touch. She took up a hand-mirror and turned to get a better view of her dimpled back. What a shame it was that she should have so few opportunities for wearing décolleté gowns! There weren't many girls who had such a neck and shoulders to display. She felt that their smooth, soft whiteness somehow gave her a quite exceptional claim to consideration; for so exquisite a creature as herself everything ought to be made easy. How could she possibly be expected to darn stockings and dust the parlour? It was only for a couple of minutes that she stood there, smiling at her-

self; but they were minutes that affected her whole life.

She gave a last caressing twist to her skirt and turned from the mirror just as Margaret Lane entered. For the space of a breath the two women surveyed each other. Then Sylvia said in a charmingly pleading tone:

“Oh, do let me wait and go down with you! I hate having to go into a room and face a crowd of people all by myself.”

Margaret Lane was too thoroughly feminine not to understand the meaning of that request; it was one more ray of light thrown upon Sylvia's character. But she only said quietly: “Why, of course, if you want to,” and let the maid slip her long coat off shoulders very unlike Sylvia's.

Then she too glanced at herself in the mirror, and with scarcely a pang. For the greater pain shielded her from the lesser. And side by side with Sylvia she descended the stairs to the drawing-room.

Several of the guests were already there, and while they were greeting Vida Dareth, Mr. and Mrs. Kean, the ex-Chicagoans for whom the dinner was given, came in, accompanied by a young man whom Sylvia, being possessed of an

excellent memory for anybody who had ever looked admiringly at her, immediately recognised as the one they had met in the restaurant months ago, on the occasion of her first real talk with Dr. Macneven. He was now reintroduced to her, and his instant reference to their former meeting established him at once in her good graces.

On the other side of the room, talking perfunctorily with Margaret, stood Noel Maurice. Sylvia felt, rather than saw him look at her. Dr. Macneven had not yet appeared, but this new man, this Mr. Haller——? Sylvia gave him her prettiest smile, and such a fleeting glimpse of her blue eyes as must make him wish for another.

Mrs. Dareth, a striking figure in her daring costume of ivory white and royal purple, moved from group to group, smiling, graceful, hospitable—and tense, doubting, half afraid under her apparent self-possession. She threw Sylvia a quick, searching glance, questioning whether her interest in Phil Haller were real or feigned. It was not by accident that he was there, and assigned to Sylvia as a dinner-partner. Vida Dareth too had an excellent memory; and she meant to make the cause of her former annoy-

ance serve her now. And yet—and yet—could her absorption in his rapid talk be genuine? Could she be honestly indifferent to what had happened such a short while ago—have forgotten that Dr. Macneven's arrival would bring the four who had taken part in that brief scene together once again? She herself had ventured—was it little, or was it much? She was beginning to feel that despite all her cleverness she had played a losing game. And now she was afraid; afraid of her husband, of Maurice, of the doctor—and of herself. She dared not look along the narrow path she was treading; on one side, a wall; on the other, an abyss. To keep her foothold; that was all she could think about or hope for at present, except . . .

Well, she might not succeed in hurting Dr. Macneven, but at any rate she would try!

Maurice was the only one of the three to betray nervousness. He had grown thin during the past Winter; a feverish unrest shone in his once happy and eager eyes, and his long, slim artist's hands were never quiet. Margaret, listening to his ill-connected sentences, and noting his frequent uneasy glances at the door, looked up at that portrait of Vida Dareth which now hung upon the wall with a new understanding.

But what had happened between those four? Sylvia's evident interest in young Haller deceived her in one way, perplexed her in another.

Once more the heavy velour portières parted; the doctor came in, apologising for a slight tardiness which he accurately described as unavoidable. Immediately after his arrival dinner was announced. He took Margaret in, and as they passed Noel Maurice she saw him give the curtest of nods, and Maurice turn chalk-white. But it was the baffled, angry, yet somehow wistful look in the painter's eyes which especially puzzled her.

Mrs. Dareth watched them all through half-drooped lids, with an anxiety she did her best to conceal.

Probably the only people who really enjoyed that dinner were Sylvia and young Haller. For Mrs. Kean had a large appetite, a great liking for rich food, and was trying to reduce her ample amount of surplus flesh, which combination caused her to find these affairs where she was constantly tempted to break dietetic rules decidedly trying; while her elderly husband was still too much of a novice at what he called "the social game" ever to feel at ease in a

strange house. But Phil belonged to the next generation, and had no such qualms.

"You know," he was saying confidentially to Sylvia, "you know I'm awfully glad my sister—Mrs. Kean—is going to stay in New York awhile. All the rest of my people are dead, and I'd hate living anywhere else,—except Chicago, of course," he added with hasty loyalty. "I think New York's awfully jolly."

"I didn't know Mrs. Kean was your sister," Sylvia exclaimed, remembering some of Mrs. Dareth's talk about her husband's rich associate.

"Didn't you? I thought—— But then I keep forgetting that this is the first time I've ever had a chance to say anything to you. It seems as if I must have known you for an awfully long time, I've thought of you so often."

And he really believed he had.

"Do you live with her—your sister, I mean?" Sylvia asked. They had reached the fish course by now, and she had had time to discover that she needed to contribute only an occasional question.

"Not on your life, I don't!" he laughed. "I've got diggings of my own—an awfully jolly little place. I say—I wish you could see it!"

He paused a moment, wrinkling his forehead in deep perplexity. Then an idea struck him, and he exclaimed:

"I say! Let's have supper in my rooms some evening. I'll get Jessie—Mrs. Kean—to chaperon us and we'll do a theatre first. Will you?"

"If mother'll let me. I'd like to, ever and ever so much." Impossible to doubt her sincerity! "But how about your sister? Will she . . .?"

"Oh, Jessie's an awfully good sort—does everything I ask her to. Tom's a bit of a duffer, but he generally lets her have her own way. He bought the Long Island house because she wanted it, and she wanted it because I said I wouldn't spend the summer with her unless she went some place where I could keep my boat. Good joke on Tom, ain't it? He hates the water. I've got an awfully jolly little schooner with an auxiliary engine. D'you like yachting?"

"I love it!" Sylvia's knowledge of sailing was limited to an occasional trip on a ferry-boat. However, she was sure she would "love yachting" if she ever had a chance to try it.

"That's bully! I'll take you out in the

'Pauline' whenever you like." He hesitated, flushed a little, and looking at her with his honest, boyish eyes full of admiration, said in a lower tone: "The chap I bought her from called her that. *I* didn't. Guess I'll have to change her name—some day."

Sylvia, smiling and dimpling very prettily, ate asparagus tips with considerable relish. She was having what she herself would have described as a "perfectly lovely time"; and she was not inclined to be critical.

"You might rechristen your boat the 'Jessie,'" she remarked demurely. "Wouldn't your sister be pleased?"

"Guess she'll have to be pleased some other way. I've about decided on another name."

"What is it?" asked Sylvia with crude but becoming coquetry.

"Don't know yet, myself. I'm going to find out, though, soon as ever I can." His tone made the implication doubly obvious. He was neither a bashful nor a subtle young man.

Sylvia bent her head and pretended great interest in the tiny bird on her plate. At last she said:

"I suppose Mr. Kean goes sailing with you very often?"

He shook his head and laughed. "Not much he don't! Tom doesn't approve of me one little bit. He thinks I ought to go to work with him, and I won't. Why should I, when I've coin enough as it is? What I say is, I've only got one life to live and I mean to get just as much fun out of it as I can."

"But," timidly suggested Sylvia, suddenly remembering Dr. Macneven's speech at the meeting, "there's such lots of work that ought to be done, and hasn't anything to do with making money."

"You mean this political reform and social uplift business? Oh Lord, there are always plenty of old frumps and fogies to look after that sort of rubbish. You're only young once and you might as well have all the good times you can get. It's lots more sensible to go ahead and enjoy yourself than to bother molly-coddlng over a lot of dirty, smelly people. What I always say is that if they're poor it's their own fault. They spend every cent they can get hold of on drink, and they'll just sit down and live off you if you give 'em half a chance." He emptied his champagne glass, feeling that he had dealt with the question of poverty in a

manner at once brilliant and full of common sense.

Sylvia was greatly impressed. Here was certainly a very comfortable doctrine, and an exceedingly easy one to practise. It never occurred to her to wonder how it came about that a young man who objected so emphatically to other people living in idleness should be doing that very thing himself.

Meanwhile Dr. Macneven, seated between Margaret and Mrs. Kean, was trying to fulfil his social obligations and watch Sylvia without permitting either the effort or the preoccupation to become apparent—a rather difficult feat. Mrs. Kean, however, proved of great assistance to him. She had had an operation for appendicitis a year or so before, and she felt that he as a physician would of course be interested in its every detail; she forthwith proceeded to recount them to him, minutely and at great length. All he had to do, therefore, was to put in an occasional “Oh yes,” or “Indeed!” in the attentive tone his profession had trained him to use. Mrs. Kean later pronounced him a most intelligent man.

When they first sat down to the table the doctor’s stolen glances brought him only pleasure;

but as the meal progressed Sylvia's delighted acceptance of Phil Haller's very evident admiration began to hurt and then to trouble him. He envied the other man's youth, his good looks, his gaiety and assurance as he had never envied Maurice's. Soon he was jealous of him as he had never been jealous of Maurice. And he wondered a little at this, not realising that it was because he cared now so very much more for Sylvia. To love her had become as natural, as unavoidable as breathing. But the hope, the exultation which had been his such a very little while ago—where were they now?

Margaret looked on, helpless. And because she understood Sylvia as he never could, her eyes darkened with foreboding.

Later, when the women were taking coffee alone in the drawing-room, Mrs. Kean used the interval to become acquainted with Sylvia. A kindly, narrow-minded woman of the strictly conservative type, her interests never strayed outside the little circle of her friends and relatives. But she adored her brother, and had noticed his very pronounced attentions to this sweet-looking young girl. She drew Sylvia to a seat beside her on the sofa.

"Mrs. Dareth tells me you and she are cousins," she began.

"Yes; several times removed. It's a pretty distant connection, but Vida—Mrs. Dareth has been very nice to me." Sylvia spoke with no thought of sarcasm.

"I like to see people acknowledge the claims of relationship, and so few do nowadays," replied Mrs. Kean approvingly. "Is yours a large family, my dear?"

"No; I'm an only child, and the few relatives I have are so far away I never see them."

"That's a pity. There's nothing like having a lot of your own folks; then you don't have to go outside for friends. It's a terrible thing to be alone in the world! I often think how dreadful it must be to have a great deal of property and no family of your own to leave it to." This was a subject on which Mrs. Kean felt strongly.

"People often leave all their money to hospitals and things, even when they've dozens of relations," answered Sylvia, strangling a yawn. She was bored, but the half hour before the men came in had to be got through somehow, and she might as well spend it with Mrs. Kean as with anyone else—perhaps better.

"That's something I don't approve of," Mrs. Kean declared emphatically. "Property ought to be kept together. When my father died he did just the right thing; he left me a comfortable sum and the rest of his fortune to Phil. Of course, if my husband had been poor—still, it's not good for a woman to be too independent." A horrible thought struck her. "My dear, I do hope you're not a suffragette?"

"Oh no." Sylvia would have responded "Oh yes," with equal sincerity had the "not" been omitted from that question.

Mrs. Kean beamed on her. "I thought you couldn't be. Two years ago, when I had my operation for appendicitis, I told my cousin, Laura Barnes," etc., etc.

Mrs. Kean was now fairly started, and until the men appeared she talked steadily, pouring out a flood of petty information about people whom Sylvia had never seen, never expected to see, and was soon resolved to avoid seeing if she possibly could. The result was that when the men at last emerged from the dining-room and Phil Haller came straight to her she received him with a warmth of cordiality which so flattered him that he re-

mained at her side during the rest of the evening.

"Your little cousin seems to be a very sweet girl," remarked Mrs. Kean to Mrs. Dareth, just before bidding her good night.

If Vida Dareth regarded Sylvia with no great affection, she was at least quite without animosity towards her: and she would have taken considerable trouble in order to hurt Dr. Macneven. Now it appeared just possible that her opportunity had come. She seized it.

"Yes, Sylvia's a dear child," she replied enthusiastically. "She's been brought up in the good old-fashioned way, and she shows it. When you get to know her a little better you'll be surprised to find how docile and innocent she is—quite without any of the modern, advanced ideas that are so shocking in a young girl."

Mrs. Dareth would have declared that what she most admired in Sylvia was her independent spirit, had she thought the road to Mrs. Kean's favour lay in that direction.

She felt she had good reason to be pleased with many of the evening's incidents. It had found her quaking with vague fears which remained unmaterialised. She had dreaded melo-

drama, and seen nothing save polite comedy. But when the last guest had gone and she was alone in her bedroom, the moment she remembered as dominating and almost blotting out the rest was the one in which Noel Maurice, coming for a conventional good-bye, had gripped her hand and whispered fiercely: "Have I humiliated myself enough to satisfy you?"

Polite comedy, that whisper whose reverberations she seemed unable to drive out of her ears?

Presently the comb she had been automatically running through her long hair slipped unheeded to the floor and she shivered a little as she leaned back in the low chair before her dressing table. Beyond this evening she had not looked. Now it lay behind her. What did she intend to do? Of the alternatives confronting her, which did she mean to choose?

The anxious yellow-flecked eyes staring at her out of the mirror grew sombre; the white forehead puckered, the pencilled eyebrows drew together in a frown which the ever-present fear of wrinkles instinctively dissipated. What she really wanted was to let things stay as they were; but that was obviously impossible. She might remain passive: but the others? Dr.

Macneven was a constant menace, the more dangerous because his ideas and motives were to her quite incalculable. He was in love with Sylvia, she knew; how that love might make him act, she could not divine. And even were the doctor eliminated, she was aware that she could no longer hold Maurice in check. Her talk of their "ideal friendship" had degenerated into grim farce. And she did not want to send him away. The fire she had kindled, meaning only to enjoy its warmth and perhaps its exciting possibilities, had flared up and out. . . .

She had a sudden swift vision of herself in a two-rooms-and-bath apartment, boiling the breakfast eggs over the gas-jet . . . a vision from which she recoiled with a feeling of actual physical nausea.

In whichever direction she moved, there was something unpleasant which she must encounter. And during all her life she had turned her back and walked away from the unpleasant. Indignation began to rise within her. She was angry with circumstances, with the doctor, with Maurice—bitterly angry with herself and the susceptibility she had been unaware of, or at least failed to take into account.

For a long, long while she sat almost motionless, staring moody-eyed at her image in the glass. And the question: "How could she best insure herself against discomfort?" remained unanswered.

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH

PHIL HALLER was a youth who never permitted the grass to grow under his feet. He had abundant health, plenty of time and money, a very clear idea of what he wanted, and no scruples about making other people uncomfortable. Not that he was ill-natured; not at all. But if people would insist upon getting in his way,—well, they must expect to suffer the consequences of what was quite evidently their own fault. His sister had long since discovered the futility of opposition, so she philosophically decided that whatever he resolved to do must therefore and necessarily be right; a belief which saved her from a good deal of worry and inconvenience.

Thus when he told her that he had asked Miss Farnham to go to the theatre and afterwards have supper in his rooms and wanted her to chaperon the party, she acquiesced at once. She would not have refused even if she had disliked Sylvia instead of being, as was actually the case, greatly pleased with her. She knew that Phil had sowed a large and bounteous

crop of wild oats, and thought the time had now come when he ought "to marry and settle down." But as she had often said to her various female relatives: "When I look at the girls of to-day, my dear, I shudder—positively shudder!" If Sylvia should prove to be indeed the exception she seemed, why then, "Phil might go further and fare worse," thought Mrs. Kean.

Sylvia herself was naturally much pleased by this change in the situation, for it placed her, according to her own opinion, in a position from which she could look contemptuously down upon Noel Maurice, and—almost!—upon Mrs. Dareth. Besides, it helped to bridge the gulf which her mistaken confidence had dug between her mother and herself, providing her once more with the admiring domestic audience before which she had of late hardly ventured to perform.

The morning after Phil Haller's little theatre-party, Mrs. Farnham brought in Sylvia's breakfast tray—a custom which had been tacitly established during the Winter—and sat down on the foot of the young girl's bed, hoping to hear about the evening's amusement and at the same time rest her already weary legs.

"Oh, mother, why did you bother?" Sylvia exclaimed. "You ought to have called me."

This was the regular formula, and Mrs. Farnham made the expected response:

"It's no bother at all, dearie; it doesn't take a minute to fix the tray." She hesitated, and seeing Sylvia smile ventured to ask: "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Perfectly lovely! Mr. Haller has his own automobile, and we rode to the theatre—the Follies'—in that. He'd engaged a box, so we were awfully comfortable, and afterwards we went to his place for supper.—This toast's stone-cold, as usual. I do wish you'd speak to Annie about it!—He's got the dearest little apartment you ever saw, right off the Avenue in East Forty-th Street. Goodness only knows what he pays for it! And we had a perfectly delicious supper. His own man served it, and I didn't know the names of half the things. But they tasted awfully good, and there was champagne besides!"

"I hope you didn't forget to put those violets he sent you in water. Are you going to wear them this afternoon?" Mrs. Farnham spoke timidly; she felt guilty about the toast.

Sylvia's rosebud lips curved charmingly.

She knew what her mother meant, for this was the day upon which she had arranged to visit the settlement with Dr. Macneven.

"I'm not quite sure," she answered with a roguish glance. "Do you think it would be—exactly—the proper thing to do?"

Thus encouraged, Mrs. Farnham dared another insinuation:

"Why not? If you have flowers to wear, you might as well put them on."

Sylvia thought this over for a minute, then she nodded:

"You're right. I guess I will wear my violets. Goodness gracious, is that eleven striking? I'll get up right away."

Mrs. Farnham carried out the tray while Sylvia proceeded to bathe and dress in leisurely comfort, her conscience quieted by the stereotyped protest. Just as she was finishing her toilet the bell rang and Mrs. Dareth came in.

"I've got a couple of tickets for a charity concert at the Waldorf this afternoon," she said. "Put on your things and come out to lunch, and we'll drop in there later."

"Oh, Vida, I'm so sorry! I can't possibly."

Sylvia's genuine regret was softened by a feeling of importance. To be obliged to refuse

an invitation because of a previous one was for her a very rare experience; she had, indeed, often thought how nice it would be to have more than she could accept.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Dareth with evident surprise. She had grown thoroughly used to having Sylvia at her beck and call.

"Well, I've promised to go out with Dr. Macneven," replied Sylvia naïvely and a little proudly. She had not forgotten that applause.

"With Dr. Macneven!" Mrs. Dareth's amazement was not entirely genuine, but it enabled her to add: "Where on earth is *he* going to take you?"

"To a place called The Open House."

"The Open House? What's that?"

"It's a—it's a social settlement." Sylvia was annoyedly aware that an apologetic note had crept into her voice.

Mrs. Dareth threw up her perfectly gloved hands in a gesture of mingled dismay and protest:

"My dear child! Why *do* you want to go there?"

To that direct question Sylvia could find no answer. After a pause she said lamely:

"I—I thought it would be interesting."

"Interesting? Merciful goodness! You'll see horrors enough to keep you awake for a week! You're like me, Sylvia dear—far too sensitive for that sort of thing. I couldn't stand it"—considering that she had never tried, Mrs. Dareth spoke with wonderful assurance—"and I know you won't be able to. No one could who had any really fine and sympathetic feeling. Leave it all to the coarse-grained people who can make a business of it, darling. It's not fit for a pretty young girl like you."

"Dr. Macneven asked me to go with him——"

The apologetic note was beginning to dominate in Sylvia's voice.

"Oh, the doctor!" Mrs. Dareth shrugged her graceful shoulders. "He's an excellent physician, no doubt, but between ourselves, he's a good bit of a crank. He's got this social service, social justice business on the brain. And you're such a dear, impulsive little saint, you'll let him ride you to death on his hobbies."

Vida Dareth knew how to influence Sylvia; and resolutely, instinctively, she was combating Dr. Macneven. It would be a joy to van-

quish him, even though he never learned to whom it was that he owed his defeat.

"He does want me to do some work over there," Sylvia acknowledged; and did not add that she had herself asked for that work.

"There, you see! No one, Sylvia dear, has more sympathy with unhappiness of every kind than I have . . . you know that." Mrs. Dareth sighed. "But I believe in the appropriateness of things, and a charming young girl like you——" another shrug and an eloquent gesture completed the sentence. "Besides, dear, do you think we ought to try to interfere with the decrees of Divine Providence? for that's what Dr. Macneven's theories amount to."

Sylvia was puzzled. "He wants to make life easier——"

Mrs. Dareth sighed and shook her head.

"Pure sophistry, dear. Our proper burden is assigned to each of us. And you know it is written 'The poor ye have always with you,' so of course it must be right that some should have little and others an abundance of this world's goods—it's the Lord's will." Vida Dareth gazed piously at the ceiling before she went on: "Telephone the doctor you won't be

able to go with him to-day, and come along with me. It's getting so late in the Spring we may not have another chance—and I expect to leave town very early this year."

Sylvia, however, was obdurate, and perhaps she rather enjoyed thwarting Vida Dareth. Nevertheless, that astute lady's remarks had had their effect, and there was no exaltation in her mood when she set forth with the doctor. All the zest was gone from their expedition, and though she felt very, very good, the rewards of virtue no longer seemed particularly dazzling. The day had turned out unusually warm for that season of the year, and at three o'clock the sun gave more than a hint of the strength it would possess a few weeks later. There had been no rain for some time. The streets were very dusty, and as they approached their destination the dirt increased. Like so many New Yorkers, Sylvia was acquainted with only a very small portion of the city and this region they were now entering was as strange to her as though it had been a thousand miles from her accustomed haunts. And she found it far more repellent than interesting.

The car they were in came to a halt; an immense coal-laden wagon had broken down on

the track, and looked as though it would probably remain there for some hours.

“Suppose we get out and walk?” Dr. Macneven suggested. “It’s only a short distance, and there’s no knowing when this car’ll start off again.”

Sylvia assenting, they left the car and walked on towards the river, down a street which was certainly unattractive, though it was merely upon the edge of a congested district. Near at hand thundered the Elevated; an occasional cart rattled and banged over the badly-laid block pavement. The sidewalk was littered with refuse of various kinds; from the dilapidated garbage barrels that lurched drunkenly on the side of the gutter flowed tiny rivulets of decayed matter—also a smell drawn forth and intensified by the warm Spring sun. Outside a saloon a group of men lounged; women screamed at one another from different fire escapes. An astonishing number of cripples, maimed and deformed in divers ways, hobbled by. And everywhere children swarmed, playing, crying, running, fighting; all of them dirty; many of them underfed. A nondescript individual, aged about five, stumbled and fell directly in Sylvia’s path, and lay there howling.

Instinctively she stepped aside and would have passed on, had not the doctor stooped and picked up the yelling child.

"Hello-o!" he exclaimed. "What are you crying about? you're not hurt! Let's see what you've done to the poor old sidewalk!" He turned to Sylvia with an aside: "Just look at this little Macelli imp's eyelashes—aren't they superb? He'd be a picture if his mother'd only wash him occasionally. But centuries-old customs aren't easy to break. There now! All right again?"

The nondescript had ceased squalling and fixed his big brown eyes on the doctor's face: gravely at first; then came recognition and an ecstatic smile.

"I know what you want!" laughed Dr. Macneven, feeling in his pocket and presently producing a stick of chocolate. "Here you are."

The infant immediately departed to secrete himself in an area-way with his treasure, and the doctor and Sylvia walked on.

Dr. Macneven kicked a banana skin into the gutter, and said in an explanatory tone:

"There are eight Macelli children; three younger than this one. The father's an unskilled labourer—on the shovel, they call it—

and the mother and six elder children add to the family income by cracking nuts."

"By cracking nuts?"

"Yes; for candy and salted nuts and so on."

"But I thought all that sort of work was done in factories," Sylvia protested.

The doctor smiled. "Oh no. It's one of the home trades; they're the worst and the poorest paid. Quantities of the nuts used for candy or salted nuts are cracked and shelled by women and children in tenements—generally with their teeth."

Sylvia's nerves shrank in disgust, but at that moment the doctor paused in front of an old-fashioned, high-stoop, brownstone house; two houses originally, they had been made into one. By the basement door was a sign, "Kindergarten" with the hours: above the main entrance a larger one said simply "The Open House." Small boys swarmed all over the stoop; the vestibule was occupied by a number of girls from six to eleven or twelve years old. In response to the doctor's friendly greeting a majority of the small boys pulled off their more or less battered caps, while all of them stared frankly at the strange young lady, and one whispered audibly: "Gee! ain't she a peach!"

A little girl in a torn gingham dress, with several toes protruding from her boots, a round honest face plentifully besprinkled with freckles, and a small tight braid of sandy hair pinned close about her head, pulled the doorbell, smiling with shy confidence at the doctor. Another child, a thin, pale little morsel of humanity, stroked his coat surreptitiously, and a more valiant one threw both arms around his left leg with an affectionate ardour which nearly made him lose his balance. That all of them knew and most of them loved him was apparent even to unobservant Sylvia; and she wondered how he could endure their touch.

She was thankful when the door opened and she found herself in a narrow, uncarpeted hall, facing a slender, pleasant-looking woman simply dressed in black, who received the doctor with evident satisfaction. He at once introduced her as Miss Mannerton, head-worker of the Settlement. Sylvia regarded her with a good deal of curiosity and very little admiration.

And she remembered Vida Dareth as she had so often seen her, gowned and coiffed, manicured and shod to perfection; in her eyes the acme of elegance.

They went past a diminutive but business-like office into a fair-sized and comfortably though plainly furnished room which seemed delightfully cool and quiet after the heat and noise of the street.

“This first warm weather is very trying, isn’t it?” Miss Mannerton remarked in a low, agreeable voice. She chatted a minute, and then said: “Perhaps Miss Farnham would like to go over the house?”

Sylvia felt obliged to assent. Miss Mannerton, leaving the doctor deep in consultation with one of her chief assistants, took her across the hall and into a large room at the back. Folding chairs were piled up at one end of it, and at the other was a platform on which stood a piano, for use, the head-worker explained, in the entertainments and dances given there from time to time. At present the room was occupied by about fifty small girls, among whom Sylvia recognised a number of those she had seen waiting on the stoop, all sewing industriously under the guidance of several young women, unmistakably members of that world to which Sylvia herself belonged. She wondered what had brought them here, among these nasty little brats.

"This is a beginners' class," said Miss Mannerton, easily reading Sylvia's expression, "and the teachers are all volunteers."

Then they proceeded through gymnasium and work-shop, cooking school and dressmaking class: and every moment Sylvia's wonder and disappointment alike increased. How utterly dull and unexciting it all seemed!

Here was in fact some of that "personal service" which had so aroused her enthusiasm when she heard of it in theory. And where now was the glamour, where the exaltation? Plain, practical hard work, done day in and day out, year in and year out: for what? Miss Mannerton, indeed, had had a seat on the platform at that memorable meeting; but these others? She recalled some of the phrases Dr. Macneven had used, the indistinct, splendid vision she had seen. Service, social conscience, human brotherhood—how superb those words had sounded! And now their magic was—where? A twentieth-century crusade seemed romantic, entrancing; but when the "humanity" on whose behalf it was to be waged took concrete form in a group of miserable, dirty children. . . .

"I wish you could be at one of our neighbourhood parties, some Tuesday evening," Miss

Mannerton was saying. "A good many of the mothers come, and we play games and then have sweet crackers and coffee. They do have such a good time! By the way, do you play or sing?"

Sylvia was glad she could answer, "No."

"I asked because every now and then someone comes down and sings or recites or plays for us, and the women just love it," Miss Mannerton continued.

And Sylvia felt that she had had a lucky escape.

Her one desire now was to get away as quickly as possible, and when they returned to the parlour she took care not to sit down.

"I'm afraid I'll have to hurry off," she said to the doctor. "I promised to be home early." Which was not true.

He picked up his hat at once, and Sylvia turned to Miss Mannerton with polite insincerities about having "found it all so interesting."

"Come in again whenever you can. We'd be glad to see you any time." The head-worker shook Sylvia's proffered hand, confident that Miss Farnham would never reappear, and ushered them to the door.

When they were in the street once more the

doctor said: "You look rather tired. Suppose we take a taxi?"

"Can you get one in this neighbourhood?" Sylvia asked, picking her fastidious way along the uneven sidewalk.

"Oh yes. There's a garage right around the corner."

She gave a sigh of relief. At least, she wouldn't be obliged to return the way she had come.

Dr. Macneven was conscious of her repugnance, and he tried to look at what was so familiar to himself through her unaccustomed eyes. But he found it difficult, or rather impossible, to see as she did. For in him the impulse to aid, to soothe and minister was part of the very breath of life. That anyone, after having caught a single glimpse of the fetid mass underlying our so-called civilisation, should ever again be able calmly to disregard it, was a thing he could scarcely realise. His brain informed him that there were such people, but he instinctively took the view that training or circumstances must have fettered their natural inclinations until they had become atrophied. His imagination had endowed Sylvia with every beautiful attribute of mind and heart

that he had known in other women—especially in one other woman. And now all this recognition of her disappointment, her repugnance, the change from that hour when with glowing eyes uplifted to his she told him she wanted “to help,” was merged and almost lost in his tingling consciousness of her mere presence. It was the first time they had been thus shut in together since the afternoon they drove away from Mrs. Dareth’s house.

His ache of longing for her obliterated all else. The warm whiteness of her throat, the delicate curves of cheek and chin, the sweet rosy lips—these, which in his belief were a part of the beautiful physical guise of a yet more beautiful spirit, drew and held him, seeming to whisper promise of infinite joys. She was very near; he had only to stretch out his arms and enfold her. But for him she was sacred. And so wonderful she was, so dear, so very dear—a human flower, the materialisation of God’s own sun and air and dew, His best and greatest boon. . . .

Presently Sylvia said slowly, as though she were thinking aloud: “How can anyone spend an hour in such a place and among such dreadful people, unless they absolutely have to?”

Thought and feeling had joined, were flowing together in a current which would soon over-rush all barriers. And he answered her involuntarily:

"There are plenty of other ways. I wouldn't ask you to work here, if——"

Something in his tone made her turn to him quickly, with wide-open, startled eyes. And then the barriers went down. . . .

He spoke hurriedly, passionate, broken phrases; old, old words that seemed totally inadequate. How could he make her understand, make her feel his longing for her, his worship of her? It was as though he were engaged in a breathless, desperate struggle, battling through swarming, intangible foes in the effort to reach her heart. In later days his memory of these moments was always confused, phantasmagorical. The first clear impression was of her shrinking away with averted face and entreating hands.

"Don't!" she cried chokingly. "Please, please don't!"

"I've frightened you!" he exclaimed with swift self-accusation.

"No, oh no!" she cried in distress. "It's not that. You—you don't know me! I'm not what

you think. I—oh, I never dreamed it would be like this!” Her voice sank almost to a whisper.

The longing to take and hold her fast and kiss her into responsiveness was strong as thirst; he held himself in check with iron hand.

“I want to know everything—every thought, every heart-beat that’s yours,” he said unsteadily. “Dear, you’re the only thing on earth that matters to me now. Can’t you care for me enough to—to marry me?”

Each inflection, each tone in his voice gave her intimation of something big beyond her understanding. And the very greatness she thus dimly perceived terrified her. This love of his so far transcended anything in her experience that she quailed before it. All unconsciously it asked so much more than it was or ever would be possible for her to give. And yet it fascinated her, too. She was like one who standing in front of some mighty mountain thinks how splendid it would be to scale the summit, though all the while aware that such high adventure is not for him.

“I . . . don’t know,” she breathed childishly. Then clutching at the one invariable plea of the weak: “You must give me a little time. I can’t—I can’t answer now.”

She paused, hesitating; and suddenly all that was best in her rose up and dictated the phrase with which she ended:

“I can only—thank you, and be very proud.”

That low, quivering voice thrilled his every nerve. He took her gloved hand and lifted it to his lips, dumb, overwhelmed by his great happiness. For he believed that she had virtually given him her promise.

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH

FOR the first time in all her healthy young life, Sylvia Farnham passed a practically sleepless night. Once more she had been momentarily lifted out of her petty self-complacence; and though she might and probably would sink part way back, she would never again return to the implicit belief in her own adequacy which had been hers until that eventful afternoon. She felt as though she had been tested and the alloy in her composition proved to outweigh the gold.

A path had been opened before her, a path steep and difficult, but leading to heights she was now scarcely able to conceive. And if she resolved to tread it she would have a hand to cling to so tender; so strong, that surely it would save her from stumbling, no matter how rugged the way. And yet—could she be happy in this constant struggle to be bigger and better than she really was? Would she not quickly tire and let go her hold, or worse still, drag him down with her? Her imagination was far too limited to enable her to picture, even dimly, the demands that Alan Macneven's love would

inevitably make upon her heart and soul and brain. Only she felt very small and weak, like a child afraid of the dark.

She was indeed, afraid; afraid to resist, afraid to yield. And suddenly she realised, though but faintly, something of the chameleon-like quality of her nature; on the surface she imitated the stronger being who chanced to be near at the moment, whether that being were Vida Dareth or Dr. Macneven. She recalled her recent hesitations and subterfuges before Mrs. Dareth; she understood at last how on the night of the meeting she had taken colour from her surroundings. And she knew with intuitive certainty that Alan Macneven would expect from her more than the mere superficial compliance which was all she had to give. For though the chameleon might adopt the hue of the oak, its inner self would remain unchanged.

She had entered all unprepared upon a mental and moral struggle such as she had never before dreamed of, much less waged. She honestly wanted to know and do what was right; and she was desperately puzzled. Strange as it may seem, the question of her own feeling troubled her very little. It would be easy enough to give such affection as was hers to

bestow to this man beside whom none other seemed to her worthy to stand. And just because she so exalted him she shrank from attempting to fulfil his expectations. Must she, then, disappoint and hurt him—hurt him more deeply, perhaps, than she would ever know? But he must surely want her to be happy; and in that ceaseless, difficult climbing—

When morning came it brought no solution of her perplexities, but only that which made the choice more definite. For a note came in the early mail, a note from Mrs. Kean, asking her to make a month's visit at the new Long Island house. Not hard to guess at whose prompting that invitation had been written! And now the issue lay clear. For Sylvia knew that to spend a month in Mrs. Kean's house meant that she would leave it engaged to Mrs. Kean's brother.

Here it was, spread out before her; the dead level of an easy, commonplace existence, where the only requirements would be that she dress well and learn to order a good dinner. No effort to struggle upward to the higher regions of the spirit, to enter into those broad open spaces where the great winds blow, and life grows rich and fruitful. She need have no

fear lest she disappoint Phil Haller! His demands upon her sympathy would be, figuratively speaking, limited to yachting and the toothache. The kind of existence he offered her was one she understood and could vision clearly. A little while ago she would have deemed it all that was desirable; but during that half-hour in the taxi-cab she had glimpsed splendours strange and mystic, that gave marriage a new meaning, raised love to the level of a religion. She could not have expressed her thoughts in words, but it seemed to her that there was something almost blasphemous in using the same word to define the doctor's feeling for her, and Phil Haller's.

She had told him she would send him his answer very soon, and Mrs. Kean's note must be replied to at once—but how?

If she could only shift the responsibility—be coerced instead of free to choose! She wanted someone to give her definite advice; no matter whether that advice were to “stake her counter boldly” and dare the great adventure, or to turn from it to the small, safe path. The idea that the safest, most sheltered of paths may end upon the brink of a chasm, that storm and peril and bitter gales may visit the lowland

as well as the mountain peak, never entered her mind. All she saw was smug comfort on the one hand, and on the other a constant straining upward that might achieve unimagined glories, might end in weariness and failure.

Hoping to escape for a time from the mental debate which her various ignorances made doubly difficult, she put on her hat and went for a walk. The shops and the passers-by did indeed supply a certain amount of diversion, for new styles flaunted their attractions from every window, and the women she met wore "the latest thing" with that curious unanimity of preference which stamps a New York crowd. But her perplexities went with her.

And however she might and did try to shut them out, always at the back of her mind lurked memories of the repellent streets, the ragged children, the poverty she had seen and loathed, even while Miss Mannerton's casual words told her it was by no means the worst. What, then, was that slum which lurked around the corner, just as it lurked around the corner of her thoughts?

To shop and dress, make calls and entertain a little—perhaps a good deal; to live as one of this well-clad, overfed, easy-going throng?

Every step she took along the great highway of Vanity Fair made that prospect seem more alluring. And then a sudden dread assailed her.

She turned and walked rapidly back down the Avenue; she was going to see Margaret Lane. Margaret was very clever, very determined. Margaret wouldn't waver, but would know just what she wanted to do—could perhaps tell her, what she, Sylvia, wanted to do. She was not sure whether she could speak openly to Margaret; but if somehow, some way, she could contrive to slip the burden that so tired her onto the other woman's broad shoulders!

Her heart beat fast as she pressed the button of the electric bell and the minutes seemed endless while she waited for the door to open. Suppose Margaret were not at home after all! She gave a sigh of relief when the door swung back.

"I was so afraid you might have gone out!" she exclaimed with an impetuous warmth which surprised the older woman.

"I've been out," she replied quietly. "I've managed to acquire a horrid little cold, and I thought the sun might do it good."

"I'm so sorry."

Sylvia spoke perfunctorily; since Miss Lane was at home the reason why was of no importance. The only question in her mind was how to get what she wanted without belittling herself in the other's eyes.

She flung herself into an easy chair with that imitation of Vida Dareth's lithe negligence which had become almost natural to her, while her hostess drew forward the tea table and lit the alcohol lamp under the small kettle.

"You're giving me such a nice excuse for tea," Margaret said pleasantly. "I like to have it, but often it doesn't seem worth while to make it just for myself."

She was wondering why Sylvia looked at her so intently, and what had brought that perplexed wrinkle across the pretty young forehead. She herself was smiling and serene; only an extraordinarily acute observer would have noticed the pain in the depths of her veiled eyes.

"Please don't trouble on my account."

Sylvia's tone, though still perfunctory, was faintly tinged with condescension. She was thinking that such questions as were now worrying her could have played no part in Margaret's

personal experiences. And she felt very fascinating and important.

"Oh, I like it, you know. Only it's rather a bore sometimes having to have it all by myself." An instant Margaret's voice dragged wearily; then she added with new briskness answering the merciless spur of her will: "You take cream, don't you? And how many lumps?"

"Just a little cream; and three lumps, please."

Sylvia took her tea, stirred it in silence for a moment, and then said suddenly and irrelevantly:

"Have you ever been to the Settlement?"

Margaret took the question quietly, but there was nothing quieting—to her—in the memories it evoked. She thought of Sylvia's face and words the night of the meeting, and fancied she understood.

"Which one?" she asked with apparent indifference.

"The Open House—I think that's what they call it."

"Oh yes; very often."

"What do you do there?" Sylvia persisted, though she felt that this line of questioning was

not helping her much. Yet in her mind was a clear, if unacknowledged connection.

Margaret sipped her tea before answering; she didn't want the tea, but a pause in which to insure absolute self-control.

"Well, I teach a kindergarten class, help with some of the entertainments, and hunt up absent children—go to their homes and find out what's wrong."

An instant's hesitation; then the monosyllable that to Sylvia's self expressed so much of her perplexity broke sharply from her pretty lips:

"Why?"

For once Margaret's swift intuition was at fault; or was it that she did not want to understand?

"Why they haven't come?" she said in a steady, grey voice. "Oh, there are all sorts of reasons. Laziness, sickness——"

"No, no!" Sylvia's interruption was brusque in its clutch at the possibility which was slipping away from her. "Why do you do it, I mean?"

For Margaret to answer that question truthfully would have been to unveil her inmost self; something she never had done, probably never

would do. She took the little silver cake dish from the table and made deliberate choice of a *brioche* before she answered indifferently:

"Oh, I've a variety of reasons. And I think we ought each to do our share—it's a sort of general obligation."

Sylvia was not impervious to the rebuff; only too self-absorbed to let it discourage her.

"Well, of course it's right to do things for your friends and to give money to charities if you're rich, but when it comes to making yourself miserable and perhaps getting some horrid disease——"

She stopped abruptly; after all, this dialogue was not progressing in the direction she wished it to go, for the Settlement was in truth but a symbol of a very small part of her perplexities. Margaret's theory of general obligation might be very interesting at some other time, but it did not give her the hold she wanted. And finesse was a delicate thing she destroyed in grasping for it.

"You don't think we ought all to work that way, do you? Isn't everyone—I mean, it's sort of—well, different——" There she stuck, floundering hopelessly in the unfamiliar ethical bog.

Margaret, glad to escape from the more personal questions, threw down a conversational plank upon which Sylvia might walk to dry land.

"No, you're quite right. Different people have different kinds of work to do. The great thing is to find your own job, and stick to it."

She spoke with an irony of which she knew Sylvia to be quite unconscious. Surely, she thought, the gods must laugh to hear her giving such advice, who had so utterly failed to find her own job!

But it is safer by far to bestow dynamite than advice. For the one is a tangible thing whose possibilities may be guarded against and which can be interpreted in only a single way, while the other may be completely transformed, either by circumstances or by the consciousness of the receiver.

"It is foolish, isn't it, to try to do anything you can't do well?" demanded Sylvia eagerly.

She felt that at last she not only had firm ground under her feet but was started along the road she wanted to follow.

And that question seemed to Margaret fairly impish. Only her common sense told her that Sylvia could not by any conceivable chance

know about the pile of manuscript locked in her desk drawer. Nevertheless, she replied with an effort which gave her answer a fictitious air of being very deliberate:

“Usually, it’s more or less a waste of time.”

Sylvia said nothing; she was thinking busily. Surely, she had been more than foolish to waver when the choice lay between that which she could do supremely well, and an effort which might and probably would sooner or later become tiresome! She was glad she had come to see Margaret, though no doubt she could have found the solution for herself after a little while.

“Can’t I give you some more tea?” Margaret asked. That sixth sense with which she was endowed was making her feel vaguely uncomfortable, although she did not know then or ever after that she had laid a feather upon the swaying scales and turned the balance; whether for good or evil, who will venture to say?

Sylvia rose. Having got what she wanted, she had no further use for Margaret Lane.

“I’m sorry,” she said untruthfully, “but I must run home now. It will be getting dark before long. Aren’t we having lovely weather?”

“Wonderful! At this time of year I always feel rather inclined to envy people who live in the country. Are you going away soon?”

It was an innocent, conventional question; but Sylvia felt it as the desired coercion, forcing her to clinch her decision. And during the brief pause while she drew on her glove the scales swayed once again. Then the side upon which that feather lay sank definitely.

“I’m off the end of this coming week—next Friday. Mrs. Kean has asked me to spend a month with her on Long Island,” she said in the negligent tone of one who had more country-house invitations than she could possibly accept.

And Margaret Lane smiled inwardly at this bit of affectation, never dreaming that behind it lay the choice which would be a determining influence in several lives—her own among the number.

Left alone, she turned up her lamp and took a new novel from the pile of books on her table; but she did not read. Sylvia’s call had puzzled her. She had seen that the girl was doubtful, troubled in some way. And now she began to wonder whether she had fulfilled Sylvia’s expectations, asking anxiously if pain had dulled

her sensibilities so that she had failed the girl who perhaps needed sympathy and counsel, even though Life was showering her with its richest gifts. And the lips of the woman to whom they had been denied, these gifts so commonplace and so precious, twisted in the odd little smile which was peculiarly their own.

Then she summoned all her strength, and struggling, forced her head above the bitter waters again threatening to engulf her. There was a way in which she might find solace—if the strange power she had already felt more than once came to her in this her need. She turned to her desk and drew forth the pile of blotted manuscript, staring at it for a moment with fixed, unseeing eyes. And her very soul went out in a wordless, formless appeal.

And at last it was as though far off amid the darkness a light shone. An instant she sat motionless with bowed head. Then she began to write.

Sylvia meanwhile walked briskly homewards, satisfied that she had seen and chosen the better, happier course for herself. A series of petty accidents, however, prevented her from at once writing to Mrs. Kean—to the doctor she

had resolved to send no message until she was safely down on Long Island—and it was not until the following afternoon that she posted the all-important letter. No sooner was it in the box than a vague discontent assailed her. There came a sense of loss, of disappointment; nebulous visions that refused to take definite shape but fled before her into the dim regions of the unattainable; inarticulate whispers as of ghosts with tidings of great import they longed but were unable to make clear . . . these hovered upon the edge of her consciousness, teasing and saddening her. And with them was a misty half-realisation that although she was following the path made easy for her by that combination of circumstances and temperament we call destiny, yet had she but tried with all her strength, with all her will, to obey the faint summons of what was best in her . . . ?

Far down in the depths of her being lay fear; a terror lest for a mess of pottage she had bartered away, not her birthright, but all the finer possibilities of her soul.

She had started out with the intention of going to see Mrs. Dareth, and as she turned the corner of Park Avenue her long sight enabled

her to recognise that graceful lady just ascending her own stoop. Sylvia quickened her pace, but before she had traversed half the distance to the house she saw Noel Maurice come around another corner and follow Mrs. Dareth. Sylvia hesitated; then turned and retraced her steps. Maurice symbolised her humiliation, and she wanted to feel herself triumphant. However, that glimpse of him had crystallised her vague irritation; and the result was one of the meanest and smallest actions of her life.

She was waiting to cross the Avenue when Julius Dareth alighted from a 'bus at her side, and of course stopped to speak to her.

"Have you been to see Vida?" was his very natural question.

"I was going——" What malignant spirit lent those inflections to her tone? A shade of wonder at them tinged her thoughts.

"And you changed your mind? Won't you change it again and walk back with me?" he asked politely if not very warmly. He had no especial liking for Sylvia Farnham.

"No, thanks. Vida has another visitor. I don't think she'd care to see me or"—she hesitated, gave him a swift glance, and added deliberately, "or anyone else."

The implication was unmistakable; yet it apparently had not the slightest effect upon Julius Dareth.

“Well, I’m sorry you won’t come back,” he replied in his usual even tone. “We’ll see you soon though, I suppose.”

He smiled conventionally, lifted his hat, and went unhurriedly down the street.

Sylvia, suddenly compunctious, was glad her bit of spite had passed unnoticed; and reflected that Julius Dareth was really extremely dense.

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH

MAURICE, as Sylvia had seen, entered the house in East Sixty-th Street close upon Mrs. Dareth's heels . . . so close, in fact, that they met in the lower hall, where she had paused to give some directions to the maid.

"I'm glad to find you in this time," he said, putting a just perceptible emphasis on the last two words.

She started to speak—and checked herself. A moment they stood looking at one another; the blue eyes were cold and steady; those strange yellow flecks in the brown ones seemed to grow larger, at the same time acquiring an almost reddish tinge. The meeting glances clashed. Behind each lurked something very nearly hostile.

Then said Vida Dareth in so excellent an imitation of her usual tone that even his quick ear could scarcely detect the fraud:

"Won't you come upstairs?"

Maurice's gaze sped rapidly about the little sitting-room he knew so well. Somehow, it

looked different—perhaps only because Spring had come. There was no fire now upon the hearth, the silken curtains stirred softly in the light breeze from an open window; on the table stood a great bowl of lilacs, filling the air with their heavy fragrance. He was alone, Mrs. Dareth having left him with the excuse that she wanted to take off her hat, and he wandered slowly around the room, pausing before every picture, every ornament, every little group of the dainty, useless trifles Mrs. Dareth loved to gather about her, as though desirous of impressing the aspect of each upon his mind. So might one obliged to set off on a long journey bid farewell to objects familiar and very dear.

That soft sound of trailing laces associated in his thoughts with so many bitter-sweet moments made him turn with a suddenness which was like the striking of a discordant note. But Vida Dareth glided to her favourite reclining chair, sank down among its many cushions with a sort of insolent languor, arranged her chiffon and lace draperies with graceful, exaggerated care, and then and only then lifted her heavy white eyelids to inspect him somewhat disdainfully.

“Well?” she said slowly, letting her clear voice drag on the word.

Maurice stood gazing at her, trying to understand, trying to find some weapon with which to combat the subtle, deadening influence that now emanated like some poisonous vapour from her personality. And because he had neither rapier nor magic spell with which to vanquish her or even force her into open conflict, he used a club.

"Vida, why haven't you been willing to see me lately?"

The attack made up in directness for what it lacked in finesse.

"My dear friend, I can't spend all my time sitting at home and waiting for you."

The smile that curved Mrs. Dareth's lips relegated Maurice to a distance.

Pain forced his voice to harshness.

"But when you are at home, why won't you see me?" he insisted.

Under the covering laces her breast rose and fell swiftly, yet the smile was steady on her lips.

"What nonsense you're talking, Noel! Because I'm not always ready to chatter to you——"

He interrupted her, eagerly, wistfully: "I haven't had a word with you alone since your dinner."

Her laughter tinkled forth; and every note in it rang false.

"There, you can see for yourself how absurd you are! It's not two weeks yet since my dinner."

"How many months is it since you've let two weeks go by without seeing me?" he demanded.

His fast mounting anger did not make for coherence.

She hesitated. "I admit," she replied at last, "I admit I've given you a good deal of my time. More than—more than to anyone else."

His tense nerves quivered to the break in her phrase.

"That isn't what you started to say!" he challenged.

She felt his will forcing her to answer. And the languid indifference she had so carefully held in her voice escaped now for the first time. Her tone grew higher, almost shrill.

"More than I ought," she said irritably.

That phrase was capable of numerous interpretations, but he could not pause to analyse it.

"You wouldn't have seen me to-day, I suppose, if I hadn't—made you?"

"Probably not. Perhaps—— Oh, I don't know!" She was angry with herself for the

wavering of that reply. For once in her life she honestly dreaded "a scene."

His face was very white. But he had come there determined to end all uncertainty, and end it he would.

"I'm to understand, then," he said slowly, "that you don't want me to come to see you any more?" His voice shook.

But the woman started up from her graceful attitude, throwing out her hands as if to ward off a blow. With one short, awkward sentence he had beaten aside the delicate rapier of tone and pose with which she had controlled the situation. For the moment it was his to govern.

"No!" she cried sharply. "No, no!"

An instant she stared at him; and the yellow-flecked eyes seemed to dart forth flame. Then she sank back among her cushions, biting her lips until they bled.

With a single long stride, he was close beside her.

"There's only one way," he said hoarsely.

She tried to speak, but he gave her no chance. He had come prepared with an ultimatum. And he launched it now.

"You must come with me," he said.

Five short words; yet they made the world

reel for her. She had known what was bound to happen, though she had hoped to fight it off; she had believed herself prepared, her arguments, her wiles in order. But somehow she had not realised all that his nearness, the eager thrill in his voice would mean to her. And now she found herself trembling, and faint, and dizzy; was it with joy . . . or fear?

She did not know; only she clutched at the resolution she had made in her calmer hours.

"Sit down, Noel," she said in a voice that was breathless, strange even to her own ears. "Sit down and don't be absurd."

For the first time since their acquaintance began he refused to obey her. And he spoke quietly, though the sweat stood in beads upon his forehead and he was driving his nails into the palms of his clenched hands.

"This thing has got to end, Vida, one way or another. We've disguised and played with it long enough. Now we'll look at it as it is. You knew months ago that I was in love with you, though you kept up the friendship farce as long as you could—oh, I don't blame you! I suppose no good woman likes to admit such facts—and when the friendship farce collapsed you were all for affinities and the union of souls

and again I tried to play your game. Well, it doesn't work——”

His voice snapped.

But the sharp pain of that instant's glimpse of possible desolation had quickly subsided. She had regained much of her self-control and with it the power to fight for her own way—the way he had just declared he could no longer endure, but which he must endure, because it was her choice. If he suffered when it was forced upon him . . . well, that was unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped.

“Yes,” she said slowly, “yes, you're right—partly, at least. We must come to an understanding, you and I. You're angry with me, of course, but don't you think you were rather stupid not to see for yourself that after—after what happened a few weeks ago, I was obliged to be doubly careful? I'd worked . . . great heavens, how I worked! . . . to prevent trouble. Do you suppose I *enjoyed* going to the doctor and Sylvia? I smoothed it all over, and now” —he was about to speak when she checked him with an imperious gesture—“and now you come and talk—nonsense. I *don't* want to give up seeing you. I miss you. I'm perfectly willing to admit that, only . . .”

“Vida!” Her name broke from his lips in a low agonised cry. “Oh, my darling, what do we care about people or trouble or scandal? What difference can anything or anyone make to us, when we love each other?”

She shrank before his vehemence.

“I never said I loved you,” she declared faintly.

He came and stood over her and spoke with stiff white lips:

“You never said . . .! No; not in words, perhaps. But if you don’t love me . . . then, by God, you’re the most consummate liar on earth!”

Again she quailed. Her throat seemed parched. She swallowed hard, once, twice, before she attempted an answer. And then she recollected something she had often told herself, had found a melancholy pleasure in coaxing herself to believe—glancing at it obliquely the while, as offering a possible means of escape from just such a crisis as this.

“It is you,” she said at last—thickly, because of that parched throat—“it is you who don’t really love me.”

The audacity of that staggered him. And once more her graceful, imperious gesture

stopped his protest. She had risen and now stood facing him, drawn to her full height, cheeks flushed, eyes blazing. Never had she seemed to him so lovely, so desirable. Oh, to take her in his arms and bear her away with him that she might be his and his only; his, her lips and eyes and softly rippling hair; his, her fragility, and lithe grace. . . .

"You think you love me," she was saying. "You think you adore me, but—you wouldn't care for me, once you'd taken me out of my setting. You've always seen me in pretty clothes, with luxury all around me. My hands"—she held them up, as if for inspection—"are white and soft and pleasant to hold, because they're manicured twice a week, and never touch anything rough, or lift anything heavier than flowers. If I went with you, it would mean poverty, ugliness, humiliation, squalor. My hands, everything about me would get rough and coarsened. And then—then you wouldn't love me any more."

She had mentally rehearsed this speech until all spontaneity was gone; now that she uttered it aloud she spoke like one reciting a lesson.

The man grasped only the surface insincerity and perceived nothing of the truth—distorted,

twisted out of shape, but truth nevertheless—which lay beneath.

“You won’t come to me because I’m poor and you’re . . . afraid!” He flung the words at her as though they had been so many bricks; his long thin artist’s hands opened and shut convulsively.

But she did not wish to lose one jot of his admiration, any more than she wished to abate the passion she had never intended to satisfy. She glided instantly into another and more generous position.

“I am afraid,” she answered softly. “I’m afraid for you. Believe me, I know what I’m saying. You’re an artist, through and through. You love everything that’s exquisite, and for a woman, to be exquisite is always expensive. If I—did as you ask, you wouldn’t be happy.”

Her voice had sunk into a melancholy cadence, sweet and sad.

“Happy!” he cried vehemently. “You show me Paradise, and then tell me I wouldn’t be happy there! I want you, my darling, my dearest beloved,—just you. There’s nothing in heaven or earth I want now, not even fame—unless it’s with you, for you.” The headlong phrases rushed stumbling from his

lips. "If you're thinking of me, of my happiness——"

His brain caught fire at the thought. He came towards her quickly with outstretched arms.

She slipped around her long chair and stood upon the other side of it, warding him off; a little frightened, but enjoying the flood of sensations.

"Yes," she said in that soft tone which was a caress, "I am thinking of you and your happiness. But I'm older than you. And I'm . . . married." She paused an instant. "I've always told you how sacred I hold that tie. I can't commit a crime, Noel: not even—not even for you."

"Your marriage is a sham—a living lie! You've admitted that fifty times. It's a great deal bigger crime to go on as you're doing than it would be to come away with me. I'd adore you! Ours would be the real thing—yes, and the honest thing!" Noel Maurice was still very young. "If people shut their doors on us—why, so much the worse for them."

She had said no word of society's probable attitude; yet something bade him at least try to refute the unspoken objection.

She shook her head, replying slowly and very wearily:

"If it were possible for me to free myself—but Julius would never consent to a divorce. So since I'll never be able to come to you openly and legally, I'll never be able to come to you at all. Oh, I can't argue with you, Noel"—as he started to protest—"I'm not clever enough. Only I know I couldn't endure feeling that I was a wicked woman—it would kill me." Her faint smile was that of a martyr. "And my suffering would hurt you too, and that would make it worse. We're doomed to pain, dear, you and I. But we can always remember, and some day, perhaps, our souls——"

"Damn our souls!" cried Maurice harshly, his endurance breaking under the intolerable strain. "You've made me mad about you, you've promised everything—oh, not in so many words, but with your eyes and hands and voice, yes and your lips too! And now—haven't you any heart? Can't you feel what you're doing to me?"

He sprang around the chair and caught her wrists, baffled, longing in his rage to take and crush this frail white thing that had promised so much and would give nothing.

Vida Dareth looked up at him with wet eyes—his grasp hurt her—and her lips quivered as she murmured reproachfully:

“Oh, Noel, Noel! And I trusted you so!”

With unerring skill she had touched the right chord; she knew it as she felt his fingers relax, even though they still held her wrists. She was quick to see and use her advantage. He must continue to love her as a woman, but he must also reverence her as a saint.

“I won’t let you wreck your life and your career on my account; I won’t let you tie yourself to a woman you’d soon come to despise. It’s just because I do feel so deeply that I’m trying to choose the best for you.” She very wisely made no reference to those months during which she had carefully fanned the flame she was now rebuking. “I don’t mind about myself, but I must see to it that the woman you love is at least worthy of your respect. I want to be good, dear, for your sake.”

He lifted her hands and kissed them passionately . . . not for the first time.

“You’re an angel!” he muttered hoarsely—also not for the first time. “You’re an angel! Forgive me! But—but you are mistaken, my darling. Be true to yourself and come with me!

I swear I'll worship you always. It's your life now, your life with that—that beast, that's all wrong. You're sacrificing us both to a false idea of duty. Let Dareth get the divorce! We'll be married then, and I'll make up to you for all the miserable years you've wasted with him."

She tried to draw away her hands.

"Oh, hush, Noel, hush! You must never talk to me like this again."

"Vida——!"

"I must bear my burden," she said in a tone of infinite resignation. "Your friendship made it seem lighter for a little while, but now that's gone too, and I——"

"You intend to stay here—to keep on with this hideous mockery?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"To stay with my husband: yes, Noel."

"And I say you shan't!" His voice rose threateningly. "It's too horrible even to think of! You, so pure, so perfect, and he——"

At that moment the door opened and Julius Dareth walked into the room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH

AN instant he stood, calmly surveying the other two with an enigmatical glance. Then he deliberately selected a chair, sat down, crossed his knees and leaned back, quite evidently waiting for one of them to speak.

Maurice, who at Dareth's entrance had instinctively dropped Vida's wrists and sprung away from her, now came forward and placed himself protectingly at her side. He had certainly not expected to see Dareth, but he did not altogether regret his coming. The results of an explosion might be satisfactory. He wanted to speak, to accuse and to justify, but the other man's quiet gaze seemed somehow to deprive him of words. And it was Julius Dareth who at last broke the tense silence.

"Hadrn't you both better sit down?" he said civilly. "Our talk will very likely be rather a long one. Though of course if you prefer to stand"—as neither Maurice nor Vida moved—"why, suit yourselves."

"We may not be willing to listen to you." Maurice's tone was defiant. He was angry with

himself that he had used so clumsy a phrase with which to meet a situation that Dareth's commonplace remark had rendered suddenly grotesque.

Julius Dareth smiled. "On the contrary, you'll be more than willing. I'm afraid, my dear Mr. Maurice, that you don't understand our relative positions quite so well as I do."

Vida stood rigid, her face white as her laces. In the momentary pause which followed her husband's singular comment she moistened her dry lips and said in a voice fear-deadened: "I'm innocent, Julius, I'm innocent. I swear to you I'm innocent. I'm—innocent. I'm—innocent."

She went on repeating the words over and over again, with a dreadful, dull reiteration. There was something ghastly in the monotony of her tone; not an inflection, not a change.

And Maurice felt as though a jagged saw were being pushed back and forth across his quivering nerves.

"I am perfectly well aware," replied Julius Dareth as quietly as though he were making some entirely trivial statement, "I am perfectly well aware that from your point of view you are indeed absolutely innocent. I think

I'd have rather more respect for you if you were not." He paused an instant; then added meditatively: "In fact, it's to Mr. Maurice rather than to you that I want to talk. Although perhaps it would be as well for you to remain here during our conversation. It may interest you."

Vida Dareth stumbled forward and fell into a chair. Relief unnerved her; she sobbed hysterically.

"When you've entirely finished crying," remarked her husband politely, "I'll go on with what I have to say."

Cold water dashed in her face would have been less effective. An instant more and he could continue:

"I've been thinking for some little time——"

"One moment," Maurice interrupted. Though he still felt that he was whirling in a topsy-turvy world, with his every theory of life crashing to ruins about him, he had regained sufficient self-control to speak firmly. And denial was evidently useless; there was only one thing for him to do. "Whatever blame there may be in this—affair, is altogether mine. But I don't admit that I've done anything wrong. It's because of your——"

Now Julius Dareth interrupted in his turn.

"My dear young man," he said wearily, "I've already told you once that you do not understand the situation. Please don't try to imitate your favourite heroes and make me keep on repeating what's so exceedingly obvious. I'm not alluding to the events of the last hour—though I'll go over them as briefly as possible, just to show you that I at least know what I'm talking about. You've been asking my wife to run away with you, and she refused. You were surprised—not unnaturally. I don't wonder at that, though if you'd only consulted me I could have told you that whatever she might make you believe, when it really came to the point she'd remain exactly where and as she was."

"You've been listening!" Maurice exclaimed furiously; and added with bitter scorn: "Were you at the keyhole?"

His anger and contempt alike dashed uselessly against the rock of Dareth's imperturbability. Never in his life had he felt so feeble, so utterly ineffective.

"Don't get excited—it really doesn't pay," said Dareth soothingly. "I've tried it; and I know. Of course, I wasn't at the keyhole, as you're perfectly well aware—though I can't an-

swer for the servants. I've been sitting peacefully in my study. It's directly above this room, and your voice carries remarkably well."

Maurice followed his glance to the register set in the wall—the house was furnace-heated—and realised that the elder man had spoken the truth.

"Besides," Dareth went on in the same quiet, weary tone, "I'm not blind, though you've apparently taken my sightlessness for granted. And I can assure you that I'd have interfered some time ago, only I never like to deprive Vida of any amusement. In this case, though, she's gone just a little bit too far. I don't mind gossip, but I draw the line at scandal."

Maurice looked at Mrs. Dareth, seeking a clue to her wishes. But she sat with bent head, and only the nervous twisting together of her fingers showed that she was aware of what was taking place. Her apathy seemed to sap his defiance. Nevertheless, he hugged his faith in her to his heart, and it gave him courage to speak boldly, conscious though he was that it was not he but the tired-looking man sitting there so composedly who dominated the situation.

"Since you know so much you ought to know

that you've neglected——” He hesitated. He would not say “Mrs. Dareth,” he could not say “Vida,” and “your wife” stuck in his throat. He caught at the equivocating pronoun. “That you've neglected her shamefully for years—except when you wanted to indulge your infernal sense of humour by tyrannising over her. You've only yourself to blame if even her wonderful loyalty's been partly destroyed! How can you expect her to care for you——”

“I don't,” interposed Dareth, smiling. “Your heroics are very conventional and entirely unnecessary. There's only one person whom Vida loves or ever has loved. And that person is neither you nor I.”

It was a thrust for which Maurice was totally unprepared. And when its significance—or what he took to be its significance—dawned upon him, the foulness of it made him sick and dizzy. He could not argue with this calmly smiling man; he could only deny.

“That's a damned lie!” he cried vehemently. “I tell you, you don't know her——” His own rage throttled him.

And still Julius Dareth smiled.

“My dear boy,” he said gently, “I'm sorry for you . . . I'm very sorry for you. I know

just what it's like. *I* was in love with Vida once. And when at last I found out that she couldn't care for anybody but herself I—well, it wasn't pleasant. You see, I'd believed what she—suggested, exactly as you do. And that's why I've made up my mind to disillusionise you thoroughly before you leave this room."

"Then you'll have to keep me here for the rest of my life," Maurice responded, loyal if somewhat banal. "You'll never make me your dupe! I know nothing about your feelings and care less. But I do know that she's been miserably unhappy with you. Oh, you haven't beaten her, perhaps; but you've done worse. And now," he hurried on rather incoherently, "you've got her chained. I tell you, if she had her choice, she'd come with me! It's only because she imagines it would be wrong—it's nothing but her sense of duty that keeps her with you. She'd marry me to-morrow if you'd just be considerate enough to die," he ended, with all the brutality he could muster.

And Julius Dareth regarded him, quietly compassionate. Then his eyes travelled to his wife, and rested for a moment on her graceful figure, so exquisite in its softly clinging

draperies of chiffon and delicate lace. As she sat bending forward with clasped hands and bowed head the jewelled pendant at her throat swung away from her neck, sparkling in the one faint gleam of sunlight that stole through the curtained window. And over Dareth's face came the expression of one who has found that for which he was seeking; but for a time he was silent. At last:

"You honestly believe that?" he questioned, still more gently. "You honestly believe Vida would marry you and follow you to the ends of the earth—that's the proper phrase, isn't it?—if she could?"

Maurice bit his lips. An enraged husband he could have understood and perhaps dealt with, but this quiet, assured, self-possessed man whose only feeling towards him seemed to be one of compassion, upset all his preconceived ideas and perplexed him utterly. He felt that he was appearing in a singularly unheroic light, but he could not stifle the unacknowledged dread cowering beneath his defiance.

"I *know* she would," he asserted brusquely, striving hard to convince himself.

"Very well," Julius Dareth said as composedly as ever. "We will put it to the test, here

and now. Vida shall have a divorce if she wants it—I'll take care to provide all the necessary evidence—but not one cent of alimony. I like you too much, Mr. Maurice, to be willing to let her support you. Now, Vida, what do you say?"

She raised her head at that; and it was fear, not hope, which shone in the yellow-flecked eyes.

"You don't mean—to keep such a promise," she muttered almost inaudibly.

"I pledge you my word of honour that I do," he answered, earnestly, yet with something indefinable lurking back of his tone. "And you know I never break my word."

A brief silence followed. Then Maurice went over to her and held out his hands. But she seemed not to see them; and they fell inert to his sides.

"Vida! Vida—why don't you answer? It's your freedom he's offering you!"

Still she made no response either by word or gesture. And he pleaded again, and more vehemently:

"It's freedom, Vida! Freedom and happiness for both of us. Give me your hands—let me answer for you." He turned to Dareth, and sincere as was his emotion he had an odd sense

of playing a part. "She'll take your offer—gratefully," he said.

Once more the older man smiled.

"Divorce if she wants it, but no money," he repeated. "And I think," he added meditatively, "I think that when she goes she'd better leave the jewelry I've given her behind. That pendant, for instance."

The contempt implied by his every word and inflection would have stung marble into life. Instinctively Vida Dareth's hands went to her throat, to the clasp of the little chain on which that pendant hung. A moment they remained there; and to Maurice it was as though the universe waited breathlessly on their movements. Then slowly, very slowly, she withdrew them. And the clasp was not unfastened.

"Divorce—the courts—can't free me," she said hoarsely, jerking out the words from between rigid lips, while her strange eyes roamed restlessly about, like those of some wild creature afraid its prey was to be reft from it. "I'm married. I've got to stay—married."

Maurice gazed at her, anguish-stricken. For that touch on the clasp had been at once a symbol and a revelation. And the words she had spoken less than an hour ago, the words which

had seemed to him those of a saint and martyr, rang in his ears:

“If I could come to you openly, legally—Julius would never consent to a divorce——”

The evidence was too direct. It was she herself who had proved her every statement a lie. He was at last aware that it was no honourable scruple, no question of right and wrong which stood between them. And in the laceration of his self-confidence, the terrible, complete crushing of his faith in her, he felt that he hated Vida Dareth.

He turned again to her husband, and his lips moved, though no sound came through them. He did not know whether he sympathised with the quiet man whose pain, he was intuitively conscious, had been even greater than his own, or whether he detested him for his ruthless lifting of the gorgeously embroidered fabric which had concealed the feet of clay upon which stood that idol they had both worshipped.

“I beg your pardon,” he said dully, after a long pause.

And Julius Dareth bent his head in grave acknowledgment.

Once again Maurice glanced at the woman he had adored, the woman he now knew to be com-

pact of falsehood; and though love was dead, the passion she had so ably fostered blazed up, scorching his very soul. . . .

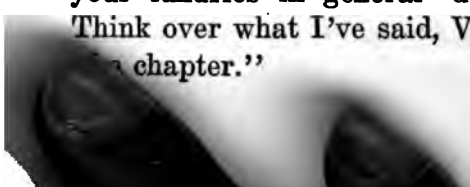
Clearly as though it were directly before him, he saw the portrait he himself had painted, the portrait whose true significance he had never grasped until this instant. His mouth worked convulsively; he longed to cry aloud, upbraiding, denouncing, entreating—but could not for Julius Dareth's steady eyes upon him.

And so without another word he turned away and went out of their lives.

For a long while both Vida and Dareth remained silent. Then the old instinct of self-justification, self-glorification even, were that still possible, arose within the woman's breast, and she said appealingly: "How could I leave you when you proved that you trusted me so?"

He paused a moment; and though he had believed he knew her through and through, he marvelled at her daring . . . or was it perhaps a genuine self-deceit? He sighed wearily. Then feeling the dual task he had set himself to be not yet fully accomplished, he resisted the temptation to relinquish it and rest.

"Suppose," he said in his most even tones, "suppose we end all pretence, you and I. We're to live out our lives together, it appears, and it will be easier for both of us if I can make you realise, here and now, that what I have absolute trust in is your care for your own interests. It wasn't true, what I said awhile ago about scandal; you're infinitely more afraid of it than I am. I know you'll never do anything Society would call wrong, nor will you ever risk making yourself uncomfortable. All your favourite talk about sympathy and feeling is utter bosh, Vida. If you're wise, you'll stop some of this constant posing, for it's sure to be found out . . . some one's sure to call your bluff sooner or later. And I might as well tell you now that you'll never be allowed to—to pose to any other man as you've done to that poor young fool Maurice. You've made trouble enough—more, I'm afraid, than either you or I will ever know. But so far as I can prevent your doing any further mischief, I will. And I can do a good deal, because all you really care for—your clothes and your servants and your luxuries in general—depends upon me. Think over what I've said, Vida. It's the end of the chapter."



She seemed to have shrunk physically while he was speaking; she cowered into the depths of her chair as he passed her. And for the first time in many a year his eyes as they rested upon her grew gentle and full of pity.

She was alone now; alone with her self-delusions. They were sorely wounded—dead, perhaps. For the moment, disarmed, humiliated, she saw her scheming, greedy self, even as those two men had seen it. And almost she wished she had accepted the taunting challenge Dareth had flung at her out of his knowledge of her character. Then the images which had thronged her mind at the moment of her choice rushed into it again. She saw the renunciations she would have been obliged to make if she were to follow Maurice, the price she must have paid for what she called her love—something which, nevertheless, was nearer to a genuine feeling than any she had ever before known. Yet were the opportunity to come again, the ultimate event would be the same. With that swift weighing of advantages which had become second nature to her, she had sacrificed a thing she held precious in order to retain what she deemed still more valuable. She had longed to keep both; therefore she suffered as intensely

as she was able to suffer from any cause which was not physical.

To her as to Maurice, revelation had come.

Vida Dareth did not—fortunately, perhaps—realise that had she been a worse woman she would have been a happier one. For she possessed a conscience, and very many of her lies had sprung simply from the fact that until it was placated she could not rest. Always she had striven to soothe and blind it with sophistries. Now the sophistries were torn away. She and her conscience were left together, defenceless, face to face with that which she had heretofore so sedulously and so successfully avoided . . . the truth. Dr. Macneven's words . . . the words she had denied and resented . . . echoed in her ears:

“Find something to take an interest in besides yourself and your own sensations. Get rid of some of your fine feelings and spiritual cravings and become a useful woman.”

She had refused to admit their justice once; she acknowledged it now. “A useful woman.” Why—self! There was the beginning and the end of her universe. The lightning-flash of that momentary realisation seemed to sear her vision.

And not Dr. Macneven only, but that man whom she had so successfully moulded to her desires, knew her now as she was . . . thought her, doubtless, falser, more evil than she was. Where she had cultivated admiration she had reaped contempt. And writhing in the depths of her abasement, she almost admitted that the contempt was deserved.

The light faded. Darkness came and enshrouded her where she sat alone, listening to the wailings of that self she had fed on lies until truth had become to it as a torture-dealing poison. Of the future—the endless, empty future—she dared not think. But she knew she would go on; just go on; and on; and on——

So those memorable hours passed by, taking with them much of Vida Dareth's youth, leaving behind them a mark never to be effaced, though it might and probably would be at least partly disguised. For the habits of mind of a lifetime may be paralysed for a while, but they are seldom totally destroyed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH


SPRING had come again. The day was bright and warm, but when Margaret Lane entered the church she was greeted by cool air, more welcome than the usher who gave her his arm and led her up the aisle to an empty pew. She smiled inwardly at his look of mingled importance and anxiety, shrewdly suspecting that his stiffly starched collar weighed heavily on his mind.

From her seat she could see the greater part of the unfamiliar church. Scarcely a quarter of it was filled; evidently Sylvia Farnham's acquaintances were not very numerous, and Phil Haller had lived so short a time in New York that he could hardly be expected to have acquired very many. Besides, the pair were to establish themselves in Chicago so soon as the honeymoon was over, knowledge of which fact lessened such interest as their few New York friends might otherwise have had in them. Margaret in truth rather wondered at herself for being there, but somehow this marriage which was to take Sylvia far away from the

little group whose fortunes had been so closely interwoven with hers seemed to the older woman like the last act of a drama. When Sylvia left the church the final curtain would fall.

She remembered the day when Dr. Macneven and herself had first met Sylvia Farnham. How much had come from that seemingly quite unimportant encounter! It was with a familiar ache in her heart that she thought of the pain it had brought him; the possibilities of which it had deprived him. For she believed that the image of Sylvia lost would never be divested of one particle of its radiance; absent, he could and doubtless would idealise her always, whereas had he won her she must sooner or later have forfeited the splendour with which his imagination had endowed her. It was better as it was.

She could say so honestly, with no thought of self; even though her friend was now hers again, hers securely just because of that lost and therefore, she was convinced, immortal love. The worst had happened; there was no longer any reason for fear. And she to whom the dearest gifts of life had been denied took this friendship which was her all with humblest



thanks, as a treasure precious far beyond her possible deserts. Yet she was not blind to the perversity of her destiny, which made her owe this security of affection which was her greatest happiness to the loyal devotion the man she loved held in his heart for another woman. Only she did not see the deeper, hidden irony—that it was the riches she herself had unwittingly revealed to him which had enabled him to grace that other woman with a character very different from the shallow one she actually possessed.

It had seemed to her once that her life was an utter failure; now, knowing that her friendship had helped Alan Macneven in his hour of deepest need, she could have felt her existence justified even without the book to which her desolation had given birth, breaking, it would seem, some cord which had kept the creative power inactive, leashed. It was no big popular success, the novel she loved so dearly, but it had sold fairly well, been praised by many of the best critics, and brought her letters which seemed to prove that it also had justified its existence. She had found her appointed work at last; and she was a modern woman, conscious of the meaning and the blessing of work,

one to whom love, though the best, was not the only thing in life.

An elderly woman, a stranger, entered the pew, and her coming served to break the current of Margaret's thoughts. She glanced around and recognised Mrs. Dareth, just about to take the front place reserved for her. She had aged more during the year, Margaret reflected, than the passing of twelve months warranted; but to say that she seemed older did not adequately express the change in the line of the crimson lips, the half-troubled, half-questioning look in the curious, yellow-flecked eyes. She was graceful still; but her grace had lost something of its self-confidence. Margaret caught at the word; yes, therein lay the crux of the alteration—doubt had replaced self-confidence.

And she thought of the incalculable effect the words and deeds and character of one woman may have on the lives of an entire group of people. Vida Dareth's influence had been potent, she knew—even while she unconsciously underestimated it.

Mrs. Farnham, proud, excited, and red-eyed, had hurried timidly up the aisle on the arm of a nervous usher; the inevitable Lohengrin

march pealed forth, and the little troupe of bridesmaids appeared in the distance. Margaret, being well aware of the cost of such affairs, did not wonder that both Mr. and Mrs. Farnham looked worn and anxious. Everyone had risen now, turning so as to get as good a view as possible of the bridal procession.

Sylvia came forward very slowly, almost covered by the fleecy cloud of her tulle veil. She was not radiant . . . only satisfied. For even at this culminating, triumphant moment she was conscious that she had taken the smaller thing where she might have had the greater. Yet she did not regret her choice, for the lesser was also the easier and she had no liking for effort. Phil Haller met her at the altar; she dropped her father's arm and turned to him with the old, carefully cultivated imitation of Vida Dareth's lithe grace.

And then the service began.

When it was over Margaret waited a little, withdrawing into the shadows. She had no wish to meet any of those whom she knew among the laughing groups now streaming out of the church. Her mood, though serene, was not inclined to gaiety. So it chanced that she

was one of the very last to leave, and as soon as she was again upon the street she hastened around a corner away from the few who lingered to chat in front of the church. Her way took her by the side entrance, and as she passed it someone emerged. Instinctively she glanced up and saw . . . Alan Macneven.

She turned away her head. It was not for her to intrude upon him in this hour. She quickened her pace, and it was with a surprise bordering on amazement that she became aware that he had joined her, falling into step in the old familiar way.

For a time neither spoke; then unable longer to bear the suspense she looked up and met his eyes. He did not avoid her gaze. And presently he said, very quietly:

"Somehow . . . it didn't hurt, friend Margaret."

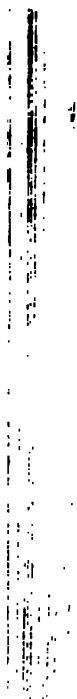
Though each had been thoroughly conscious of the other's knowledge, it was the first word on the subject that had ever passed between them. And it was the last. Even more emphatically than had Sylvia's wedding, it marked the end of a part of their lives' drama. An end . . . and a beginning. In a lightning flash she understood why he had gone to the cere-

mony, the test which he had made. The dream was dead.

The dream was dead. But the reality from which it had drawn all that was best in it was still alive. . . .

Neither Margaret nor the doctor spoke again. In a perfect communion which had no need of words, they went forward together into the sunshine.

THE END



1

